

Writing and Politics

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As writers, we all know that words mean almost everything. “In the beginning was the Word.” It was not said: “In the beginning was the Number.” So Pythagoras, who asserted that the universe consists of numbers, was wrong. It also means that writers are greater than mathematicians, although we can agree that in most cases they are smarter than we are.

But before a writer becomes a writer he or she must first be a reader. I have not come across a writer who does not read. In my country there is a writer who boasts that he is so busy writing, he is so prolific, that he has no time to read. But I have found his writings to be notoriously shallow.

At a young age I discovered words. Words are very seductive. And it was a life-transforming experience. It was so life-transforming that my grades in school started plummeting. As a result I was demoted from a science student to an art student; I was able to study literature instead of numbers and formulae. In college I had the chance to pursue the unglamorous mass communication studies major in journalism.

So after graduation I worked as a journalist. But journalism in my country, and in many countries under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule, is very restrictive. Journalists are expected to be loyal and unquestioning to the ruling party or faction. But even that does not necessarily spare journalists and editors from being imprisoned.

In the 1970s Samad Ismail, the most influential journalist in my country, was arrested and detained without trial for several years. He is a novelist, participated in the struggle for independence, and occasionally wrote speeches for the second Prime Minister. But when his patron died he became victim of factional infighting. He was accused of being a communist and became the target of a purge to free Malaysia from communist infiltration. Then the wheel of political power turned again. The fourth prime minister came in. Samad was released and reinstated to his old position but other journalists went to prison.

In my neighboring country the story is even more dramatic. Promoedya Ananta Toer (or Pram) is the most celebrated novelist in Southeast Asia. During the Sukarno regime, what was subsequently called the Old Order, he became the cultural czar of the regime. He insisted that all creative writing must be socially engaged and profess social realism. But in the early 1960s the new generation of writers protested. Writers should be free to express themselves: those who want to be socially engaged should be free to do so, but those who want to write about personal experiences that have nothing to do with society must also have the freedom to do that as well. During this conflict, several writers and dissidents were imprisoned. Mochtar Lubis, another influential novelist of his generation and editor of the biggest selling newspaper in Indonesia, was imprisoned and his newspaper banned. Most writers saw the suppression against writers as the work of Pram.

In 1965, after an abortive communist coup d’ etat, Sukarno was removed from power by the military for being too close to the Communist Party of Indonesia, which was

then the biggest communist party outside China and the Soviet Union. Suharto undertook a brutal reprisal against the communists, which left a million or so communists and their sympathizers (as well as peasants with no political affiliations) dead. Pram was exiled to the remote island of Boro to lead a primitive life. There he has to eat rats to survive, build his hut with his bare hands, and till the land to grow paddy for his own subsistence. But there, amidst hardship, Pram started telling stories to fellow inmates and wrote his four volume masterpiece which chronicled the birth of Indonesian nationhood.

Even when Pram was finally released and allowed by Suharto to return to Jakarta, no publisher was willing to publish his novels. But Pram's books were published in Kuala Lumpur by a group of cultural dissidents who lionized Pram as a sufferer and his novels as landmarks in Southeast Asian literature. The novels were translated into English and based upon the translation he was nominated for the Nobel. But translation caused a diplomatic hiccup between Indonesia and Australia because the translator was an Australian diplomat in Jakarta. His posting in Jakarta was cut short.

For what he suffered in isolation and for the tetralogy of Indonesian nationhood, Pram was awarded the Magsasay award, the most prestigious literary award in Southeast Asia. But old wounds were not fully healed. Mochtar Lubis, the novelist who suffered imprisonment under Pram's cultural regime and a previous recipient of the same award protested and, to add fuel to the controversy, returned the prize he had received more than two decades earlier.

After Suharto was finally toppled in 1998, Pram was finally free to speak. Pram, an accomplice of Sukarno dictatorship, unleashed his indignations and invective against Indonesian writers for their cowardice and complicity with Suharto dictatorship. Goenawan Mohamad, a fine Indonesian poet and to my mind the greatest essayist in Southeast Asia, who as a young poet penned the cultural manifesto for freedom of expression against Pram's social realism, urged Pram to follow the example of Mandela, to forget and to forgive. Like Lubis, Pram's bitterness also has not healed. "I'll never forget nor forgive. I have lost my property and I have lost part of my life. I want justice."

I myself can feel it, but in a different way. I worked for several years at a leading newspaper in my country. But I cannot write what I want to write. My task was to report speeches made by ministers and the prime minister, which most of the time were uninspiring and boring. When they coughed out silly statements I had to massage those words to ensure that they look ministerial. When the boredom became intolerable I started to look for another job. It was at this time that I was offered the position of speechwriter for Anwar Ibrahim, who I considered the only politician in my country with a brain. Writing speeches for a politician who is also an intellectual and the best orator in my country is no easy task. "It's hard work." I guess I did not do very badly because I often heard people praise my boss for his brilliant speeches and some of them were published in the op-ed pages of the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*.

But I was fortunate that democracy in Malaysia is still very primitive. It has not transformed itself into an industry as it has in the United States. So I was robbed of the opportunity to become a spin doctor. Now spin doctoring is a mighty art: it is the

science of bending the truth without breaking it, or the craft of not telling the truth without lying. I think the art of spin doctoring is traceable to Homer. We all know during Odysseus's return from the Trojan War, he and his friends were trapped inside the Cyclops's cave. When the Cyclopes asked Odysseus his name he replied, as in most English translations, "No-One is my name. No-One is what my mother, my father and all my friends call me." In the English translation, Odysseus was not bending the truth, he was lying. It is in the Greek that one can detect the Homeric art of spin doctoring. This was what Homer put in the mouth of Odysseus: "Outis emoi ge honoma" "Utis is my name." The spin was in the play of the sound of his name, from Odysseus to Utis which also means No-Name. Odysseus was bending the truth; he didn't break it. For ordinary people truth is strong, solid like a metal rod, and hence bend-ability is limited. But for the spin doctor truth is like rubber, or perhaps a condom: it's stretchable.

My early fascination with words and writing has a lot to do with the fact that they were the vehicles of stories. The first stories that took possession of my mind and never fail to enthrall me are the stories in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is a prodigiously long epic. Longer than the Mississippi and, I think, longer than the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Yellow river and the Nile combined. It contains, perhaps, the oldest treatise on statecraft: the discourse of Bhishma when he dies on the bed of arrows. In the *Mahabharata* one can also find the earliest art of spying. In one episode, when the blind King Dhristiristha is paranoid of the growing popularity of his nephews the Pandawas, he summons his minister of "homeland security" to advise him. This is the advise of the minister: "We must place our spies not only in foreign kingdom, but in our midst too; in public gardens, places of amusement, temples, drinking halls; in the homes of ministers, chief priests, chief justices, heirs apparent and heirs presumptive, and also behind doorkeepers and drivers of chariots ... our sources of information must be widespread and unlimited."

I suspect Edgar J Hoover and the boys at Langley learned their art from the *Mahabharata*. For that they must thank the power of literary words, spoken or written.