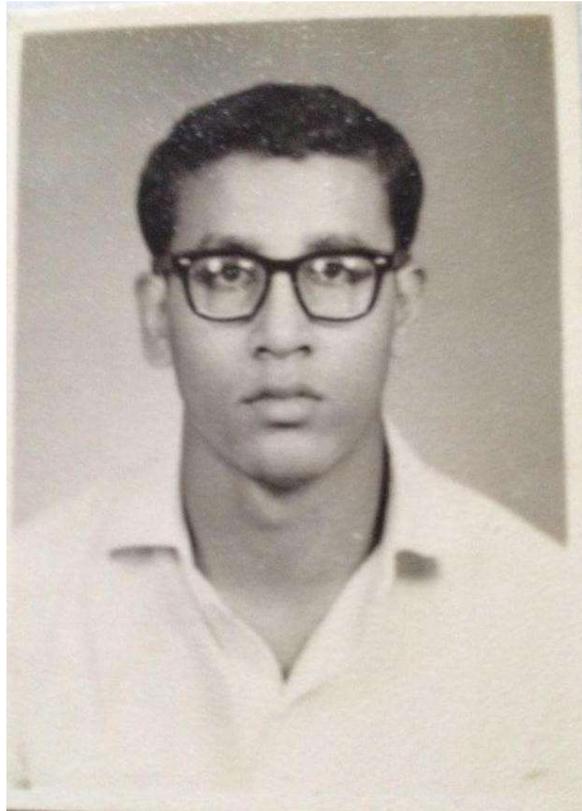


## A SPECIAL FEATURE ON OMAR MOHD. NOOR



Omar Mohd. Noor's yearbook photo, courtesy of Annuar bin Omar

## “a stranger in a known realm”: A Reintroduction to Omar Mohd. Noor’s Pioneering, Self-Searching Poetry

*Augustine Chay*

Who was Omar Mohd. Noor? If you opted for English Literature as an elective SPM<sup>1</sup> subject in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you may remember him as the author of “A Quarrel Between Day and Night” – one of the six poems introduced under the overarching theme of ‘Conflicts’ (Kaur & Nooraida Mahmor, 2014). If you are a scholar of anglophone Malaysian poetry, you may recall that his name was often included in cursory lists of first-generation anglophone Malaysian writers, alongside better-known contemporaries like Lee Kok Liang, Ee Tiang Hong, Salleh Ben Joned, K.S. Maniam, and Wong Phui Nam (Kee, 2000). If you are an avid reader of anthologies of anglophone Malaysian literature, you might remember seeing his name and poems in the following compilations: *The Second Tongue* (1976), *An Anthology of Malaysian Poetry* (1988), *In-Sights* (2003), *Spirit of the Keris* (2003), *Malchin Testament* (2017). And if you are Muhammad Haji Salleh, you can hark back to the formative time and place you first befriended him: Brinsford Lodge (former home to the Malayan Teacher Training College), England, in 1963 (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2006).

Despite earning the favour of numerous editors and compilers over the years, Omar (who passed away on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1997) never published a poetry collection to his name. Unless you knew him in a personal or professional context (as one of his pupils or colleagues), you have probably never put a face to his name – or associated his poetry with a particular human voice. Perhaps what Omar sounded like as a poet – his accent, pitch, rhythm, and intonation – may be publicly known in the near future, if an audio or video recording surfaces. At the moment, too little biographical information about him is known to reconstruct even the most bare-bones iteration of a birth-to-death narrative. With the help of Muhammad Haji Salleh, however – who helped *MMOJ* get in touch with Annuar bin Omar (one of Omar’s sons) and consented to a short interview – we were able to obtain three photographs and some details on Omar’s education prior to his two-year course at Brinsford. He was educated on both sides of the Penang Strait (which had to be traversed by ferry before the Penang Bridge began operating in 1985). His childhood and teenage years were spent in well-established mission schools that were once primarily staffed by British expatriate teachers: St Mark’s Primary School (in Butterworth), Francis Light Primary

---

<sup>1</sup> The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education) is a national examination that all Malaysian students take at the end of their fifth year of secondary school. It is equivalent to the GCE O-Levels. Omar’s poems were also formerly included in the syllabus for the STPM (Malaysian Higher School Certificate) Literature in English paper.

School (George Town, Penang), and Methodist Boys' School (George Town). He then attended the elite Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Setar, Kedah, where he presumably decided to pursue poetry and a career as an English language teacher in a plurilingual decolonising nation that would begin phasing out English-medium education in earnest from 1970 onwards (Stephen, 2013).

By the late 1960s, Omar's poetry began gracing the pages of literary magazines and journals on both sides of the Straits of Johor: *Focus* (Singapore), *Tenggara* (Kuala Lumpur) and *Poetry Singapore* (University of Singapore). With the exceptions of "Constellation of Starry Showers" (published in *Focus* in 1966-7) and "Lieutenant Adnan" (published in the *Sunday Times* on 13 April, 1969)<sup>2</sup>, the first part of this special feature republishes all the poems that Omar published (that we know of) during his lifetime. These poems are sequenced according to the year of initial publication. There are twenty-two poems in total, dating from 1968 to 1988. After 1988, Omar's anglophone poems only appeared as republications in the aforementioned anthologies (Vethamani, 2015). He also wrote Malay poems, but never published them. Thanks to Muhammad Haji Salleh and Omar's family, we were able to access forty-six unpublished poems (all written in English, including an earlier draft of "i am only this"). Fifteen of these poems were undated; the rest date back to the 1960s: 1964 (ten poems), 1967 (eleven poems), 1968 (one poem) and 1969 (nine poems). The second part of this special feature includes ten of these unpublished poems: "the psychopath" (1964), "thoughts before suicide" (1964), "confusion" (1964), "where are we going?" (1967), "a flight into poetry? listening to jazz" (1964), "an american marine talked to me in his death" (1967), "mending a childhood" (1967), "search for a refuge" (1969), "ostentational" (undated), and "a town is not a home" (undated).

The dates on Omar's unpublished poems suggest a once-in-a-lifetime decade of intense productivity. Given the body of work at hand, it would be fair to describe him as being – first and foremost – an oft-overlooked poetic voice of the 1960s. Consider "e.e. cummings talked to me from his grave" (1968), an early publication that immediately establishes the poetic predecessor Omar drew direct inspiration from and the immense scope of his geopolitical imaginary:

i died when the lebanon  
politico-military crisis needed  
a solution  
you were then a student  
with an absolutely empty knowledge of  
what 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964,  
1965 and 1966 would be like

---

<sup>2</sup> This poem was translated into Malay and published as "Leftenan Adnan" in *Berita Harian* on 4 May 1969. This Malay translation can be accessed online via *NewspaperSG* (reel number: NL5954).

The reference to the Lebanese Civil War of 1958 (a key event in the larger Arab Cold War) is eventually followed by a succinct evocation of the tumult of 1960s America (“jfk, mlk /civil rights and lefts erupting/ in watts and selma and harlem”) and the use of personification to bring the chaotic violence of the then-ongoing Vietnam War (1955-1975, 4.2 million casualties in total) to the poet’s desk: “i can hear the vomiting of/ russian, american, vietnamese (both)/ planes even from here”. These events, undeniably destined for the history books, share the page with the (seemingly autobiographical) poetic persona’s anxiety about the legitimacy of his modernist style:

has anyone been called another  
e.e. cummings?  
i am struggling down here  
to be a whiteman  
maybe i'll learn to spell my name  
with capital letters at the back  
of each word

As the poem goes on, the list of American references grows longer: The Great Society, T. S. Eliot (born in St. Louis, but he gave up his American citizenship at 39), Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Paul Tillich (born in Prussia, migrated to the US in 1933), Bob Dylan. All this may seem rather unremarkable now, in a time when *Pax Britannica* has long given way to *Pax Americana*. As Stephanie Tam (2021) points out, “While English was first seeded by the British Empire as the language of the elite, its power was consolidated by the rise of the United States” (part vii, para. 4). It is worth noting, however, that this level of American-centrism was atypical for the time. Muhammad Haji Salleh recalls that British literature and culture retained a measure of prestige and gravitas even while the United States was eclipsing the United Kingdom in terms of economic and military might:

I was overseas then, and my models were mostly British, not even American. I was a voracious reader and would comb libraries and bookshops for new books. The Third Programme of the BBC was especially uplifting—it provided plays and poetry readings (I still remember Dylan Thomas reading his poems in his deep and romantic voice).

[...] My colonial indoctrination was so complete, for some years I was made to think that only English literature was great. The Irish or the American were unimportant, and in some universities not even mentioned, what more taught. (Mohammad A. Quayum, 2006, p. 7)

In a more self-lacerating recollection of the era, Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2020) opines that the “twelve years after Merdeka appears now like an interregnum in a Twilight Zone, we young colonized English-language-loving zombies sucking the blood still from a separated fantastical dead motherland called England” (p. 40). It’s likely that the anxiety of British linguistic and literary

influence – augmented by institutions like the Commonwealth, the Colombo Plan, the BBC, the British higher education system, the Beatles, and the now-defunct sterling area – loomed large in a younger Omar as well, especially if we take “mending a childhood” to be autobiographical: “i could utter english words/ before realising i was a malay,/ entertaining dream-thoughts/ of going to england and writing poems in english.” Stepping foot on English soil, however, only seems to have convinced Omar that the centre of anglophone modernism had shifted westward, all the way across the Atlantic (Cleary 2021).

But why the claim that Omar was “another e. e. cummings”? Was it simply because he also opted to eschew the capitalisation of titles, most proper nouns, and the pronoun ‘I’? Why not a comparison to other American modernists who also experimented with the stream of consciousness technique, or – given the recurring preoccupation with mental health – a ‘confessional’ poet like Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath? The Omar-Cummings comparison certainly goes beyond the unmistakably distinctive typographic choices, but it has identifiable limits. Scholars of Cummings have clarified that Cummings made frequent use of capitalisation (though often in an unconventional manner), as with other typographical conventions like punctuation, line breaks, spacing, and parentheses (Friedman, 1992). ‘I’ did consistently become ‘i’ in Cummings’ work, but the decision to first present his name as ‘e e cummings’ was actually made by his publisher (ostensibly as a marketing strategy, which evidently worked). Cummings himself capitalised his name in private correspondence and in the handwritten signatures that accompanied his work (Friedman, 1992). Omar, on the other hand, did consistently type out his name in full lowercase (“omar mohammad noor”) under his unpublished poems. His unpublished work was also consistent in presenting the titles of his poems in full lowercase (even if some of these poems did feature heavy use of capitalisation). This justifies our decision to decapitalise the titles of all his published poems, without modifying the use of capitalisation within these poems.

One of the rare exceptions to Omar’s all-lowercase titles is telling: the unpublished “mixing Islam with wine” (1967). Omar may share Cummings’ tendency to defend individuality against the forces of conformity (the coinage “mostpeople” precedes the term groupthink) by interrogating the entrenched hierarchies of everyday life and singling out the homogenising forces of mass consumer culture for critique, but he did not fully embrace a secular vision of modernity that compartmentalised religion as a private sphere of life – one clearly demarcated from the boundaries of politics, economics and science (Nongbri, 2015). The gnomic significance of a line like “the true muslim is a true Christian” (from “despair in radioside”) can be pondered alongside the changes that accompanied the first two publications of “malaysian sun misbehaves”. The 1968 version,

published in *Tenggara*, presents the poems' title in full lowercase, but the poem itself capitalises all proper nouns (Malaysian, English July, European, Adam). In its next appearance in *The Flowering Tree* (1970), the title is in all-caps (this appears to be an editorial choice, since all the titles in the anthology are presented this way). All the proper nouns (malaysian, english july, european) are now decapitalised, while "Adam" – "the first psychologist/ in the world" – has been replaced with "Nabi Adam". It's not evident if there is a clear and coherent vision of how Islam should serve as a foundation for moral and social order in post-independent, multireligious Malaysia in Omar's body work, but there is enough evidence to suggest that this was a question that Omar returned to again and again. It's also worth recalling that the threat of 'communist atheism' was once ubiquitous in the early decades of the Cold War; Omar was grappling with similar – but not identical – competing visions of modernity that we are most familiar with today ('Western liberalism' vs. 'Asian values', western individualism vs. eastern collectivism).

Finally, we can consider the lack of Cummings' brand of romanticism in his practice of literary modernism (or 'pre-postmodernism', as Gillian Huang-Tiller (2005-6) argues). Cummings may have also grappled with notable political themes (antiwar sentiments from his WWI experience; deeply-held anticommunist convictions after his 1931 trip to the Soviet Union), but his popularity also stemmed from his optimistic investments in love, eroticism, and a playful sense of humour (Rosenblitt 2020). The poetic persona most favoured by Omar's former anthologists, however, comes to the fore in more inward-looking poems like "my clever pupils", "final" and "shut". This is the voice of the muted, sequestered 'i', more preoccupied with personal and interpersonal dynamics – the burden of the teacher's 9-to-5, small-town gossip amongst one's social circle – than local, national, and global Cold War-era contestations. An inward lament, rather than a clarion call in the town square. In a "town is not a home", Omar imagines a private sanctuary for a beleaguered and world-weary poetic persona:

i'll make a home, but not in a foggy town  
quiet is my home  
uninhabited by complacency, confusion, rush,  
irresponsibility, arrogance and irreligiosity  
quiet makes people masters  
and nobody's slave

Quietness may facilitate inner peace and tranquillity, but it also suggests an absence of verbal communication. We hope Omar-the-man eventually found the silence he was looking for (if this poem was autobiographical), but the voice of Omar-the-poet will hopefully be heard loudly and clearly in the minds of all readers of this special feature.

## References

- Cleary, J. (2021). *Modernism, empire, world literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, N. (1992). NOT "e. e. cummings". *The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society*, Spring 1, 114-121. <https://faculty.gvsu.edu/webster/cummings/caps.htm>
- Huang-Tiller, G. (2005-6). The modernist sonnet and the pre-postmodern consciousness: The question of meta-genre in E. E. Cummings' W [ViVa] (1931). *The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society*, 14/15, 156-177.
- Kaur, P., & Nooraida Mahmor. (2014). Examining the role of the English literature component in the Malaysian English curriculum. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 134, 119-124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.229>
- Kee, T. C. (2000). Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia. *Kunapipi*, 22(1), 4-6. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss1/5>
- Lim, S. G. (2020). The breaking of a dream: May 13th, Malaysia. *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities*, 48, 39-52. <https://rpb17.nsysu.edu.tw/var/file/173/1173/img/3608/4.pdf>
- Mohammad A. Quayum. (2006). On a journey homeward: An interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh. *Postcolonial Text*, 2(4), 1-13. <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/458/456>
- Nongbri, B. (2015). *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press.
- Omar Mohd. Noor. (1969, May 4). Leftenan Adnan. *Berita Harian*, 4. NewspaperSG. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/beritaharian19690504-1.2.41>
- Rosenblitt, J. A. (2020). *The beauty of living: E. E. Cummings in the Great War*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Stephen, J. (2013). English in Malaysia: A case of the past that never really went away? *English Today*, 29(2), 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078413000084>
- Tam, S. (2021). A tale of two tongues. *The Believer*, 135. <https://www.thebeliever.net/english-esperanto-universal-language/>
- Vethamani, M. E. (2015). *A bibliography of Malaysian Literature in English*. Maya Press.