

# A Malaysian Journey

By Rehman Rashid

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Despite its insipid and travel-guide sounding title, this autobiographically based narrative of postcolonial Malaysia is a noteworthy addition to the otherwise relatively anemic selection of what amounts to rather nondescript and unimaginative accounts of modern Malaysia one would likely encounter. Rashid's contribution is lucid, imaginative and engaging. In his own way, Rashid shrewdly—and often bluntly—confronts some longstanding sensitive issues that academics in Malaysia have long, perhaps understandably, felt it best to leave unscrutinized. At any rate, little that has come along about modern Malaysian affairs in the recent past has been as unsanitized, descriptively grounded or forthcoming. For me, this was the most refreshing aspect of the book.

Conceivably it's precisely because *A Malaysian Journey* does not suffer from the typical veneer or pretense of a scholarly contribution that makes it all the more effective in dealing with the critical fault lines that have distinguished the social and political landscape of the country since independence. Based in part on his "re-introduction" to Malaysian society after a self-imposed exile in Hong Kong and Bermuda, Rashid brings his journalistic style to uncover both his own personal history, one that begins alongside that of independent Malaya, and the threads that bind his story to the larger social complexities that have dotted the nation's recent past. His narrative is the result of a reimmersion through extensive travel and conversations with various "ordinary folks." The book opens with Rashid's border crossing experience in 1992 via Padang Besar; marking his return from his sojourn. Shortly thereafter the discussion reverts to the late 1950s, and Rashid delves into a discourse about Merdeka and his own early childhood in Perak.

Interspersed with accounts of his experiences traveling around the country, the book proceeds chronologically but only until the events of the late 1980s—including commentary on the split-up of UMNO (United Malays National Organization) and Mahathir's assault on the Supreme Court and how Rashid's own departure from Malaysia in 1988 was tied up with developments in this period.

To be sure, Rashid's highly personal account and interpretation of issues as diverse—albeit eminently salient—as Islamic fundamentalism, nation-building, identity, politics, the historically entrenched saga of racial/ethnic inequality and, as recent developments in the country reflect, the associated sensitivities surrounding Bumiputra rights/privileges, exposes his own disposition. Rashid's accounts of his experiences across Malaysia are instructive and illuminate some of the incredible diversity and social

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complexity that is Malaysia. Experts may find some of the historical discussion somewhat condensed. There were occasions when I thought Rashid could have been more systematic about presenting some analysis or that he could have further developed the subject matter at hand. In particular, readers may find the discussion in the last two chapters, where I personally would have preferred some more extensive interpretation, somewhat embryonic. Nevertheless, most of the sixteen chapters are reasonably well developed.

More importantly, it is his ability, through his stories and re-immersion experience, to candidly reflect on the past decades and to acknowledge some of the ensuing social wounds and scars associated with domestic economic and social policies—especially those that have affected race relations in the country—that provides the raw material for what can be turned into meaningful class discussions with students. In this respect, it is an equally compelling and instructive journey into Malaysia's enduring dilemma of overcoming wounds that have been self-inflicted as well as inherited. Clearly the biggest drawback of the book is that Rashid has chosen not to "update" and add to the original manuscript despite the fact that the book has gone through subsequent re-printing since it first appeared in 1993. Perhaps there is a sequel to the original volume in store.

Despite not being "current" the narrative nevertheless deserves serious consideration by those teaching about the region. Rashid's writing style makes the book highly accessible, although someone altogether unfamiliar with the geography and social history of the country will quite certainly lose some of the more nuanced observations and comments. Teachers will find it more fruitful to use this book in conjunction with a standard book on Malaysia or to otherwise provide students with a reasonable grasp of the critical issues noted above for them to adequately appreciate Rashid's commentary, not to mention his, at times, rather subtle observations and his (albeit very sparing) use of colloquial terms. At any rate, as a pedagogical tool it would be well suited for undergraduates, but I believe it can be quite engaging for beginning graduate students as well. Indeed, for those teaching about Malaysia and Southeast Asia, there is quite a bit one can do in the classroom with Rashid's fine narrative. ■

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