

A Succession of Destinies -My Life, in Stories

Y.A.M. Tunku Naquiyuddin Ibni Tuanku Ja'afar (2018)
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Autobiography, as a genre, is always absorbing. Momentarily, we are offered glimpses into the private life of another person who may be so different from us, to look into aspects of his or her private and public life, of poignant preoccupations, partialities and impartialities, and principles and convictions. And that is the case with YAM Tunku Naquiyuddin who has joined a small community of Malaysian autobiographers. Tunku's effort of retrieval of his life through his stories allows different utterances, aspects, colours, lights, shadings, and textures to be heard, seen, and felt.

As a literary scholar, I normally go beyond the literal reading, to see what reading against the grain can inform us about the composite picture of a man who has travelled the world, who speaks Malay, English, French fluently, a man of many accomplishments. The title of his book is apt— *A Succession of Destinies: My Life, In Stories*, dedicated to his father, brings to the fore how he has a hand in charting his destinies.

What was the push factor for Tunku to take up the pen to write about his life? In the prologue, he emphasizes his attention to details and observations. His mother helped jolt some of the earlier memories. Having considered everything, Tunku focuses on the different phases of his life. One gets the sense that Tunku cannot sit still. A French proverb sums him up rather nicely - *Qui n'avance pas, recule*” which means “Who does not move forward, recedes.” For him, there can be no standstill in life, only evolution or devolution.

YAM Tunku Naquiyuddin, Abang to the family, Tunku Naquiyuddin to immediate family members, Bill Jaafar to those in the UK, Tunku Bill in Malaysia, Kubill or Kubih - these names disclose his multifaceted personalities that his book reveals. He is the boy, that mischievous child, growing up in Seri Menanti and other parts of the world, the diplomat, the businessman, the Regent, the survivor, the learner, the candidate, the custodian, the teacher, the party goer, the family man. As a literary critic the shape of the narrative offers certain insights. Where are the turning points? What are the conflicts? As the story teller, the moments that he captures paint the portrait of who he is.

Let me illustrate with a few anecdotes:

As a boy, Tunku had both adventures and misadventures. On the one hand, we have these snapshots: Tunku successfully luring a baby monkey into a trap but got bitten in return by an angry bigger monkey; Tunku experimenting with smoking at 7 because he wanted to see what the fuss was all about; Tunku running away from home, bringing with him an ovaltine tin filled with coins. On the other hand, we get to see the respectful child who dutifully wrote to his parents, the one who suffered from asthma in very cold winters – the contrast between laughter and nostalgia becomes the pattern of his later life. These snapshots show the budding of his personality – fun loving, sensitive, witty, resilient.

Another chapter describes his work at the Malaysian embassy in Paris. One of the many things he dealt with was this: One day, Tunku recalls, “an exceptionally beautiful

Singaporean, a young lady by the name of Roberta, came to the embassy”. Tunku asked, “What can I do for you, Roberta?” And guess what, Roberta replied: “As you can see from my passport, I was born Robert, but I am now Roberta.” I will leave it at that. You’d have to read his book to see how he dealt with that matter.

Another two stories are particularly hilarious. Tunku loves food. He admits being very fond of everything French. But he could not bear foie gras (goose or duck liver, in the form of pate). And goose/duck liver is standard fare at many social events, probably similar to our *sambal belacan* (Malaysian shrimp condiment). Tunku ruminates:

I did not want to offend my hosts, but I could not eat foie gras. I struggled badly until I discovered a solution: while talking to my host, I would very discreetly bury my foie gras under my lettuce”. (p. 54)

In another episode, Tunku remembers Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim’s visit to the embassy. As they were driving, Tunku pointed out a famous Parisian Park, the Bois de Boulogne. “He said, Tan Sri, ini Bois de Boulogne. And she replied, “*Buah apa?*” (p. 58). Bois, the French term for “wood” sounds like *buah* or fruit, and the innocent quip injects humour to the narrative. There is something to be said about a memoirist who is able to make you chuckle or compel you to laugh at the stories he remembers.

Upon leaving the civil service, and encouraged by his father, Tunku became involved in the family business. What does one learn about Tunku’s change of career? He made quick study what he had to do; The upshot is – the business grew in leaps and bounds. With his language and networking skills, and cultural fluency, Tunku takes to business as a duck takes to water. However, other people are not as culturally skilled as him, captured in a story that took place in the Philippines. **Y.A.M** Tunku relates: “As I approached the front desk, the manager beamed at me, and I had a feeling he would know my name. He did – in a way. Oh, hello Mr Yam!” he greeted me cheerfully. I had never been called a yam before” (108). Y.A.M is the acronym for Yang Amat Mulia (The Most Noble), but for those who are foreign to Malay acronyms, such mistakes may be embarrassing. But Tunku takes it in good stride - even in the throes of making high bids and living a very busy life making deals, he has a few funny stories to keep us engaged.

In another phase of his life, we see Tunku performing his role as the regent of Negeri Sembilan. He worked closely with the diplomatic community in Malaysia. But bureaucracy was stifling. Tunku found another way. He told one frustrated ambassador: “I’ll give a shortcut, Your Excellency ... Next time, your private secretary can call my private secretary, and then you can inform Wisma Putra that you already have an appointment” (p. 104). This attitude towards disbanding with red tape shows a man who privileges pragmatism over using rigid formalities.

Upon completion of his term as the Regent, Tunku returned to business. The financial crisis hit Malaysia between 1997-1999; Antah was not spared. Tunku survived the difficult period where his business plummet through sheer determination. Tunku also reveals his passion for learning. At Aberyswyth University, he was very studious. For him “learning never ends”. His passion for education culminates in the birth of Kolej Tuanku Jaafar, a college that is inspired by British education, but also caters for students from low-income families through his foundation. He is sensitive into making education inclusive for all.

For me, Chapter 7, fittingly titled “The Candidate”, is most insightful. Tuanku Ja’afar has passed on; meetings were held to discuss his successor. It must have been an uneasy time, still grieving the death of his beloved father, and at the same time, having to face the scrutiny of Malaysians as they waited with bated breath for events to unfold. I shall not dwell on Tunku’s ponderings– I think it is best to read this historic moment yourself. But I shall quote this:

When the name of the new Yang Di-Pertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan was announced, I immediately stood up, turned to my cousin, now Tuanku Muhriz, *sembah* and kissed his hand, and said “Ampun Tuanku. Congratulations.

Within that one sentence, the magnanimity of the man is so clearly revealed.

In the chapter, “The Teacher”, Tunku imparts important attributes of a leader who needs to set direction, learn to read people, stay focused, achieve synergy, work within one’s limits, do what only a leader can do, keep an open mind, and learn from other leaders. Each edict comes with anecdotes how he arrived at those traits. Despite the pressures that come being a businessman, Tunku has the right antidote. In the chapter, “The Partygoer”, he revels in fun. In one gastronomic adventure, he persuaded himself to eat baby scorpions which turned out to be “very crispy” (p. 183).

We also discover that Tunku is very much a family man. The depth of his love for his wife Tunku Nurul Hayati Ku Bahador is very evident in the pages of his book. We learn of their courtship. Tunku Nurul could run very fast, she used to train with Ishtiaq Mubarak. But as Tunku says, “even knowing she could outrun me, I still went after her” (196). He is a loving father, who teaches his children this edict of life: “Be disciplined. Live within your means and do not overspend. Look after your assets. ..Do not bite off more than you can chew” (204).

The ultimate chapter is an epilogue – the Skeleton. It was 1983 in St Moritz, Swizerland. Tunku was going to lie in his Toboggan called the Skeleton, and then he would go down the track at 55-65 km an hour. There was a very sharp bend called the shuttlecock. 5 people have died negotiating that bend. He tried once. Failed. He tried again. Failed again. He did not want to give up. He sought advice, and someone said, “You have to fight every corner”. Tunku then tells us:

On the first two tries I had simply hung on for dear life, with barely any say in where I was going or how I was going to get there. Now I realized that perhaps the key – as life itself- was to balance between surrendering to the momentum and imposing some control over it. (p. 206)

What does this final story inform us of Tunku? Here is a man, zany enough to take risks, but always, he takes calculated risks. He says: “There is always danger at every corner but in life we should be able and willing to take risks. To persevere is important. It is also important to focus, consolidate and manoeuvre” (p. 207).

A succession of destinies -My Life, in stories is indeed a page turner, unputdownable book, full of fun with insightful advice. Tunku’s stories not only provide a peek into his private life but they also reveal important moments in Malaysia’s history.