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## Literary chitchat

THE former editor of a publishing house, A.F. Yassin, recently put out *Sembang Sastera: Bersama Orang Persuratan* (Fajar Bakti, 1998, 310 pages), in which he talks to 64 Malay writers and literary activists of varying stature, who muse on their lives and what they have been up to. Chatty, frank, nostalgic, irreverent, these conversations are light, in response to Yassin's equally casual probing. His target is largely a small and shrinking group of people aged around 60 and above, loyal supporters of the Jawi-scripted *Utusan Zaman*, in which most of these sembang-sembang first appeared.

Now that these sembang-sembang have been romanised and packed in a handsome hardcover book, more readers, especially literary researchers, local and foreign, can be expected to benefit from them. Of course the information ranges from the revealing to the trivial, but the book is pertinent as it provides insight on what went on in the world of Malay letters.

Yassin notes how, at 86, A. Samad Ahmad, compiler of the *Sejarah Melayu*, laments the fate of being almost forgotten by people whose friendships he has always valued.

Samad Ahmad started his career before the war, writing books such as *Cinta itu Bahagia* (1936), *Kenang-kenangan Selangor* (1937), *Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu 1, 2, 3* (1958), *Tak Melayu Hilang di Dunia* (1960), *Singapura dilanggar Todak* (1963), *Laksamana Tun Tuah* (1969), *Nahkoda Tenggang* (1970), and *Zaman Gerhana* (1976). Perhaps of all his books, *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* (1937) is the most memorable; I still recall its tearful impact upon me.

Along with other nationalists such as Ibrahim Yaakop, Ishak Haji Muhammad and Mohamad Salehuddin, Samad Ahmad was jailed by the British. His cellmate at Changi Prison was Ahmad Boestamam. He belongs to that heroic generation who believed that the rise and fall of the Malays depended upon the Malay language being honoured in its own birthplace, and regaining its status as the lingua franca of this region.

Another author, Abdullah Sidek, is also half forgotten. Before the war, he put out 12 novels, mostly short, entertainment stuff. After the war, there were 11 more - including the detective novel *Siapakah Pembunuhnya*, which went through several editions - plus countless short stories and books on grammar.

One reason for Abdullah's apparent neglect is language: Malay written in the 1940s differs from that of the 1990s. Then, the prose was often dense, bogged down by convoluted sentences with numerous commas and ellipsis, saying little. Nowadays, young readers, spoilt by the Internet, television and videos, have little patience to endure such "torture".

Perceptive writers change with the times. Not so Abdullah, who refused to even use a sprinkling of Indonesian or English words, as was common among his contemporaries. The sad writer admits that none of his three children, nor his numerous grandchildren, give a hoot about his contributions to Malay letters, or take any interest in literature as such.

An icon of Malay intellectuality, A. Samad Ismail recalls when he first worked as a reporter with the *Utusan Melayu* led by Abdul Rahim Kajai. Once, Samad Ismail finished an article and handed it over to Rahim Kajai who, upon reading it, threw it into the wastepaper basket, saying it was

too raw to merit his time. He then asked if Samad had slept with a woman, and ordered him to go out and dig some dirt, walk the backlanes, taste the bitter drink, and then start to write.

Thirty years later, Samad Ismail would give the same advice to young reporters who were terrified of his sharp, cuss-loving tongue. Yassin reiterates that his intimate knowledge of Tun Abdul Razak, Lee Kuan Yew, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Hussein Onn is invaluable in capturing the mood of the country after independence. However, one would be hard-pressed to compile the texts of Samad Ismail, because he almost always never kept copies. The chain-smoking editor hungry for a scoop or clean copy simply could not be bothered with such a mundane thing.

Yassin finds that because of a number of secrets, A. Samad Said is reluctant to write a straightforward autobiography, a task he thinks unnecessary because among his novels, *Bulan Tak Bermadu di Fatihfur Sikri* (1966), *Sungai Mengalir Lesu* (1967), *Langit Petang* (1981), *Daerah Zeni* (1984), and *Hujan Pagi* (1987) are, in a sense, autobiographical. *Salina*, in particular, is a thinly veiled early memoir in which he deals with the pain of loving an older woman, a prostitute endowed with a heart of gold. In 1996, he was invited to give a pep talk to a group of TESL students at a local university, where he discovered, much to his disappointment, that he spoke better English than many of them.

An unusual incident illustrates Abdullah Hussein's reliability: He once held a pot of bubbling gulai asam pedas ikan sembilang from Johor Baru to Petaling Jaya on his lap in a cramped Volkswagen beetle. All this for the love of Usman Awang, whose brother in Johor was the only one who knew the right ingredients to fix the dish as he liked it. Upon arriving in PJ, they had a grand feast. Such a simple act of selflessness bonds friendship.

Yassin discovers that the secret of Abdullah's general good health is, after all, no secret at all: eat well and do physical exercises. Abdullah, now almost 80, adheres to the strict discipline and maintains his work habits. Always focused, he sees his health and his writing as synonymous.

Most people remember Adibah Amin for her delightful column 'As I was Passing', which ran in the *New Straits Times*. She is also, by the way, a successful playwright, actress, translator and novelist. Her first two, *Gadis Sipu* and *Puteri Asli*, were published in 1949. They were followed by *Bangsawan Tulen* (1950), *Seroja Masih di Kolam* (1968), *Garam Gula Duka Bahagia* (1980), and *Tempat Jauh Lagi dikenang* (1983). Her masterly translation of Shanon Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (No Harvest but a Thorn, 1981) puts Malaysia on the international literary map.

Adibah champions the rights of women. In *Seroja Masih di Kolam*, she zeroes in on a group of young women facing up to the problems of living in a city, imbibing urban values while holding on to traditional ones. Protagonist Diana, though engaged, still messes around with another man, her cousin. Amidst such confusion, it is unclear how the women will fare in the end. However, Adibah is a traditionalist at heart. No matter what Diana does, she still strives to be a loving wife and a good mother.

Columnist M. Noor Azam's 'Perspektif', which ran in the *Dewan Masyarakat* from 1972 to 1997, had quite a following. He analysed the social issues of the day with rare perceptive insight, looking at an issue from multiple viewpoints. His conclusions, however, nearly always endorsed the status quo. What impresses the reader is his direct, clear, unequivocal language. Such clarity is widely emulated by those who matured in the 1970s, during which Malay as a means of intellectual discourse still had its doubters. Frugality in language is a habit that contributed to his rise in the corporate world, which he entered after serving as Dr Mahathir Mohamed's political secretary.

Masuri S.N., in his latest book of essays, *Kreativiti dan Kemanusiaan Dalam Kesusasteraan*, confesses that these are merely random or even spontaneous thoughts on the writing of poetry. He was first published at 17, and is still writing at 70.

Such commitment is propelled by deep compassion. It all started in his youth, when he beheld a group of emaciated beggars waiting for handouts in the streets of Singapore during the Japanese Occupation. Somehow, writing about the wrenching experience helped him deal with the widespread injustices he sees inflicted upon the helpless. Though his poetry is often dark and somber, there also countless cheerful ones. This sense of being true to life has made his works so lasting, and much sought after.

Sembang Sastera is invaluable, specially to students of contemporary Malay literature, because it provides a cauldron of tidbits with which to spice up the perennially long-overdue assignment.

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