

CULTURAL MEDALLION 2017

DJAMAL TUKIMIN



As an advocate of creative writing in Malay, Djamal believes that appreciation of Malay literature can be deepened through the performing arts.



Asian Poetry Reading, Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, 1975

Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin

Jamal Bin Tukimin (b. 1946), commonly known as Djamal Tukimin, is a prolific figure in the Malay literary scene in Singapore and the wider Malay archipelago. Since 1963, Djamal has been active as a writer, critic and researcher. He has authored a wide range of literary works, including novels, poetry, plays and critical essays published by notable publishers in the region. Djamal has been published in many anthologies including 'Dari Jendela' (2009), a collection of poems from Singapore and Malaysia. Since 1975, four of his theatre plays have also been staged.

In the 1970s, Djamal was one of the founders of Grup Gelorasa, a group of poets who injected new energy to the development of contemporary Malay literature. As an advocate of creative writing in Malay, Djamal believes that appreciation of Malay literature can be deepened through the performing arts. In 2009, Djamal performed an hour-long solo poetry recital at the Esplanade Recital Studio. Djamal has also been involved in organising and conducting literary workshops and seminars in Singapore and overseas.

As a critic and researcher, Djamal has written about Malay theatre since the 1970s. His published works include research on the development of Malay theatre in Singapore and a study of the polemic of Malay literature. Djamal continues to work on multiple research papers which are still works-in-progress. Djamal owns a collection of over 15,000 books, which includes resource materials of historic value and interest such as magazines and documents printed in Singapore during the pre-war period. As a way of giving back to the community, he allows his archive to be accessed by postgraduates and researchers.

Djamal is a recipient of the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang (2007), the highest literary award for Malay literature in Singapore by the Malay Language Council, Singapore. Locally and regionally, Djamal is a highly sought-after speaker for seminars and conferences on Malay literature and theatre. In 2009, he was also a visiting fellow at the Institute of The Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA) in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia). ■

DJAMAL TUKIMIN: THE PASSIONATE WRITER

BY MOHD RAMAN DAUD

Djamal Tukimin's dream in his youth was to be a serious and passionate writer. Today he is more than that – he is an arts advocate, an accomplished essayist, a critic and a collector of books and articles. His personal library includes rare books on subjects ranging from Malay literature to Islamic philosophy and the other arts.

Djamal was born in Geylang Serai, the second most important area of the Malay community in Singapore, after the Kampong Glam area, on 20 October 1946. His love for Geylang is expressed in his 1991 work, 'Betapapun Nyanyian Rindunya Si Anak Geylang Serai' (The Sheer Longing of the Geylang Serai Child). An excerpt is provided here:



Poetry Reading at Bulan Budaya,
Malay Village, 2002

Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin

Original Text in Malay -

*Wajah kita melacak sahabat lama
bernama azan dari Masjid Aminah
hanya bisa menghadirkan suara pilu
kerana gubuk-gubuk telah kehilangan tangis
apakah Allah kita sudah bersuara sedu
atau si anak Geylang Serai
yang pura-pura mengenal-Mu dulu?
atau si anak Geylang Serai
yang hilang pejam dari matanya?
atau si anak Geylang Serai
yang hilang sebutan dari lidahnya?*

Translated Text -

Our faces brought back the old memories
of the prayer call from Aminah Mosque
only the sad longing voice
because those shanty houses had lost their cry
Has God left us with sad voices
to those who pretended to know Him?
Or the child of Geylang Serai
has lost his slumber from his eyes?
Or the child of Geylang Serai
has lost his speech from his tongue?

The poem, probably one of the longest poems by a Malay Singaporean, was written in 1982. It expresses the poet's nostalgia for the lost landmarks of Geylang Serai.



Whilst acknowledging that change is inevitable in a country with limited land and natural resources like Singapore, the poet speaks of the need to remember our past, advocating that change cannot be at the cost of losing a sense of identity, collective memories and history.

Coming from a poor family, Djamal received his formal education at Telok Kurau Malay Primary School. All his life he has been a self-taught man with a voracious appetite for books ranging from Malay literature to Islamic philosophy. Today he has amassed a huge library with over 15,000 titles in his five-room flat in Yishun, not to mention tapes, CDs and cassettes of Malay and Hindi songs and movies. Among his early prized possessions is a book of poems, 'Setinggi Waja', written by the well-known poet Noor S.I. (Ismail Haji Omar, 1933-1990).

During his teenage years, he was attracted to literary activities organised by the Malay Youth Literary Association or 4PM (formed in 1948).



Djamal Tukimin with Mdm Chan Moh Woh, Dr Yang Quee Yang and Mdm Saroja at Kunyang, Yunnan, China, 1994

Photo courtesy of Djamil Tukimin



Later, he joined Muhammadiyah Association (formed in 1957), and married his pillar of strength, Maimunah, who is the daughter of Muhammadiyah's founder, Ustaz Abdul Rahman Harun.

His big break came in 1963 when his short story won the National Language Month competition organised by the Ministry of Culture. The short story was later published in 4PM's magazine, 'Suara Belia'.



Poetry Reading, Malay Heritage Centre, 2007
Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin



Receiving the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang (Tun Seri Lanang Award) conferred by the Malay Language Council, Singapore, 2007
Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin

...together with like-minded peers... Djamal spearheaded a poets' collective known as Grup Gelorasa.

Djamal's poems reflect his belief in freedom and independence. Between 1850 and the 1960s, Singapore was the main centre for development of Malay literature in the region. At that time, Singapore was also a hub for Malay media, film, music and culture. The separation between Singapore and Malaysia caused major and traumatic changes especially in the development of Malay literature in Singapore. Several top writers left Singapore to work and live in Malaysia, thus leaving a literary vacuum that needed to be filled.

In 1970, together with like-minded peers including Mohd Ismail Abdullah (@MIA), Eunus Asah and Haron Abdul Majid, Djamal spearheaded a poets' collective known as Grup (from the English word, 'group') Gelorasa. 'Gelorasa' is an amalgam of two words - 'gelora' (turbulence) and 'rasa' (expression). This collective impacted Singapore's Malay literary scene with its varied activities such as poetry reading at an open field or beach and dramatising poetry.

Djamal was among the young writers who supported The Literary Village (Perkampungan Sastera) organised by Angkatan Sasterawan '50 (Asas '50, founded on 6 August 1950) in August 1973. Its objective was to brainstorm ways to enhance Singapore Malay literature. Among others, the gathering of 150 writers led to the formation of a literary scheme of recognition called 'Hadiah Sastera' (Literary Awards).

Djamal is one of the pioneers of Islamic poetry. In the Geylang Serai poem, for example, Djamal emphasises the importance of faith in the Almighty, the only constant factor in one's life in order to seek a safe and meaningful journey. He is always mindful of the Quranic admonition that the wild imagination of poets could lead humanity astray. He has been praised for his portrayal of nature, as this quote from Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hadijah Rahmat's essay, 'In search for canon of Singapore Malay poetry: Reflection on nature, race, religion and love', Vol 26 (1), in 2013 shows: 'Djamal Tukimin made the attempt to explore religious themes by combining it with nature and cultural elements. He also uses images of women in his poems, including in his religious poems.'



Djamal has been an important critic, promoter and mentor of Malay theatre in Singapore since the 1980s.

His poem, 'Puisi Syahdu', reflects Islamic educational issues symbolised by religious phrases and metaphors subtly and indirectly such as 'dada langit' (the bosom of the sky), 'setiap sujud' (each prostration), 'tasbih-menasbih jari langit' (the sky fingers its rosary), and 'bulan sabit terbit di dadanya' (the crescent moon rises in her bosom). Here is an excerpt:

Original Text in Malay -

*Terbuka lempang dada langit. Kala ini
matahari berkemas menyelam atas buih lautan
kemanisan amat perasa dalam setiap sujud.*

Translated Text -

The bosom of the sky is clearly opened. At this time
the man prepares to dive towards the sea's foam
the sweetness is deeply tasted in each prostration

Djamal has been an important critic, promoter and mentor of Malay theatre in Singapore since the 1980s. He has worked closely with Malay theatre practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia, such as the Anak Alam, a theatre group based in Kuala Lumpur.

Djamal has written many essays on Malay theatre in Singapore. In 2007 he published a collection of essays, 'Arus Teater Singapura' (Theatrical Currents in Singapore). His essays have been cited by academics such as Mana Sikana (Dr. Abdul Rahman Hanafiah). Apart from these essays, Djamal has also been active as a playwright.



Poetry Reading at Anak Alam, Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, 1972
Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin



World Poetry Reading, Kuala Lumpur, 1996
Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin



Djamal Tukimin with Tan Sri Professor Emeritus Ismail Hussein, Mdm Maimunah (Djamal's wife), Dr Liaw Yock Fang, Dr Zahidi (Head of National Library Kedah), Mdm Chan Moh Woh, Dr Yang Quee Yang (sitting), National Library Kedah, 2007
Photo courtesy of Djamal Tukimin



His commitment to excellence ensures that he will never rest on his laurels.

His satirical play, 'Seekor Kerbau Hitam Legam dalam Mimpi Pangeran Tomtom' (The Black Buffalo in the Dream of King Tomtom) was staged by Perkumpulan Seni (Arts Group) in 1993.

Apart from writing a number of short stories that have yet to be collected, Djamal has published his first novel, 'Imam' (Leader). The first instalment of a trilogy, the novel tells the story of a religious teacher during the early years of modern Singapore. The other two parts are works-in-progress.

During his stint as a fellow of the Malay World and Civilisation Institute (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia, 2009-2011), Djamal produced a tome on Malay pantun which originated from Singapore. Pantun is traditional Malay poetry with verses ranging from two lines to twelve.

For his dedication, Djamal has earned many accolades including the coveted Tun Seri Lanang Award from the Malay Language Council, Singapore in 2007. His commitment to excellence ensures that he will never rest on his laurels. ■

About the writer:

Mohd Raman Daud is a writer and former senior journalist at Berita Harian.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Saya masuk sayembara menulis cerpen sempena Bulan Bahasa Kebangsaan anjuran Kementerian Kebudayaan pada tahun 1963. Saya memenangi tempat pertama dan cerpen itu disiarkan dalam majalah Suara Belia yang diterbitkan oleh Persatuan Persuratan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu (4PM) keluaran September 1963.

Cerpen yang menang itu merupakan karya sastra kreatif yang pertama. Sejak itu saya mulai bergaul dengan para sasterawan ketika itu yang datang ke rumah 4PM seperti Noor S. I., Masuri S. N. dan juga Maimunah Haji Omar. Saya berbincang dan bertukar fikiran dengan mereka. Kadang-kadang terdapat silang pendapat dengan mereka tetapi hal itu telah menjadikan pengalaman yang sangat berharga dalam usaha membantu dan membina proses kreatif.

Saya berterima kasih kepada mereka kerana sejak itu saya sudah menulis karya kreatif melebihi 50 tahun. Saya menulis semua genre sastra seperti puisi, cerpen, novel, teater dan kritikan.

In 1963, I participated in a short story writing competition during the National Language Month organised by the Ministry of Culture. I won the first prize and my short story was later published in 'Suara Belia' (Voice of Youth), a magazine by the Malay Youth Literary Association or 4PM.

That short story won accolades as a groundbreaking literary work of that time. From then on, I began to mingle with established writers who frequented the house of 4PM, such as Noor S.I., Masuri S.N and also Maimunah Haji Omar. We discussed and shared ideas together. Sometimes we would have conflicting opinions on certain matters but these discussions are an essential part of shaping and building on the creative process.

I am truly grateful and appreciative for the support I've received from them. It has been more than 50 years since I began to write. I now write in various genres of literature including poetry, short stories, novels, theatre and criticism.



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