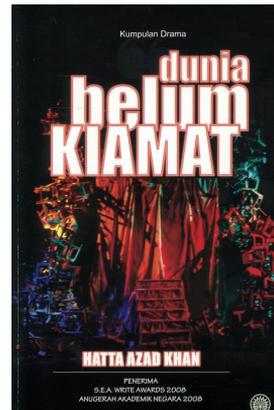


BOOK REVIEW

Hatta Azad Khan, 2013.
Dunia Belum Kiamat (Kumpulan Drama
Hatta Azad Khan).
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I came to be acquainted with Dr. Hatta Azad Khan in 1984, at the time when I watched him act “Di Mana Bulan Selalu Retak” (DBSR – Where The Moon Always Cracks), written by A. Samad Said and staged at the Experimental Theatre, University of Malaya. DBSR was, and has always been, in the forefront of realism theatre in Malay theatre. Watching the play performed by some of the finest actors in Malay theatre of the time such as Johan Jaaffar, Zakaria Ariffin, Asiah Sarji and Hatta (who played Falil, the angry young man) was a most interesting experience.

Hatta had, by then already established himself as a young playwright, having directed “Patung-Patung”, “Stesen”, “Mayat” and “Jebat”. He, along with Dinsman, Johan Jaaffar, Mana Sikana and Nordin Hassan, were hailed as proponents of absurdist theatre in the country. They staged dramas which were novel and fresh, moving away from the realistic Malay theatre of the 60’s. Their plays were expressive, stylized, hard-hitting, free from realistic settings and socially cynical. Since most of them were university students, their artistic lenses were sensitive to contemporary issues of social ills, corruption and the growing divide between the rich and poor. This sensitivity and awareness gave birth to the well-received contemporary Malay theatre. As dramatists, they were never short of issues to critique, particularly on the wrong-doings of the establishment. However, they were aware that they could not confront these issues directly. To circumvent this, they employed their artistic license and created a satirical world as a platform to ridicule the establishment. Some theatre critics used the label introduced by Samuel Beckett to refer to this genre, Theatre of the Absurd, where the play is

stylized, contains a lot of symbolism, sometimes dispenses with sets, and usually deals with complex issues which cater to a specific audience. These conceptual plays became the core of Malay theatre in the 70's. During this period, a group called Anak Alam (Children of Nature), comprising artists, writers, poets, actors and musicians was informally organized. This group introduced theatre to KL audiences, performing short plays at public places in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur. This lively arts scene of Kuala Lumpur in the 70's staged performances at the University of Malaya Experimental Theatre, along with others staged by members of Anak Alam such as Johan Jaaffar, Muhammad Abdullah, Omar Abdullah, Khalid Salleh, Hatta and Zakaria Ariffin. Anak Alam, a part of Malaysia's performing arts legacy, was based in Jalan Merbuk where ASWARA (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan) is now located. Ironically, 35 years later Hatta is still literally standing at the place where Anak Alam's base was, as Rector of ASWARA - this is indeed a fitting tribute.

Hatta is a scholar of theatre and film and a consummate playwright, who has directed more than 15 plays since 1972. He added yet another feather to his cap when he ventured into film directing with *Mat Som* (a film adaptation of a comic novel by Lat), followed by *Wayang* (2007) which won several awards. Hatta Azad Khan was also the man behind the success of *Pimai-Pimai Tang Tu*, the longest television sitcom aired on TV3. The television series was adapted by Othman Hafsham from *Syyy...*, a play written and directed by Hatta Azad Khan.

In his latest directorial effort, *Menunggu Lampu Hijau (Waiting for the green light)*, Hatta highlights issues such as loneliness, polygamy and marital complications, in addition to other socio-economic issues. And like his other works, the play is replete with sharp social observations presented with wit, irony and black humour, with a tinge of tragicomedy.

How would one define Hatta's style? In his plays, Hatta constantly delves into the social, political and economic dimensions of a changing Malaysian nation. In the Introduction to the book commemorating Hatta as the recipient of the 2008 S.E.A Write Award, Solehah Ishak aptly describes him as a socially-conscious playwright. His plays, such as "Kerusi" (Chair), "Patung-Patung" (Puppets) and "Mayat" (Corpse), deal with myriad problems, through which he strives to highlight his hopes, dreams and visions for a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation. His latest compilation of drama, *Dunia Belum Kiamat* or its literal translation, *Armageddon Has Not Arrived*, comprises five plays - "Awang", "Anak Korporat" (Corporate son), "Dunia Belum Kiamat" (Armageddon has not arrived), "Cermin Tipu

Daya” (Mirror of tricks) and “Puteri Gunung Ledang” (Princess of Gunung Ledang).

In this compilation, Hatta choses to deal with his favourite subject, the dilemma of a society confronted with economic and social developments, yet peppered with political and social injustices. In his Introduction, Hatta states that the plays presented, notably “Awang”, “Dunia Belum Kiamat” and “Puteri Gunung Ledang” are but a reflection of the colour, rhythm and style of the 70’s and the 80’s. The 60’s will always be remembered as a period of innocence, but towards the end of this era, social movements began, impacting the younger generation in this country as well as the world. The 70’s on the other hand, reminds us of cultural movements, the questioning of identity by the restless younger generation, regional and world altercations (such as the Vietnam War and Woodstock). It was a period of disenchantment, where the young wanted their ideas and voices heard. Malaysians were presented with the New Economic Plan and as a result, the 80’s witnessed an improvement in the standard of living. Yet new challenges loomed. Our society became more open through globalization and many cultural influences seeped in to create diverse and new developments. It is interesting to analyse Hatta’s aesthetical and ideological readings and interpretation of these periods in history, in his role as a playwright. Although the plays were infused with issues of nature and prospects of Malaysian society of the time, the issues are just as relevant to us today.

In “Awang”, the main character of the play is possibly a reflection of the playwright himself. Like Hatta, Awang is determined to be a dramatist. He trains a group of young villagers to stage a play, but their effort is terminated abruptly as some members of the group complain about, and reject, rehearsal techniques introduced by Awang, the director. A disappointed Awang follows Pak Tua (a medicine seller who visits Awang’s village to sell medicine) to Kuala Lumpur. Awang is moved by Pak Tua’s sales technique which he finds unique and theatrical. Pak Tua is not just a medicine seller but was once a supporting actor of *bangsawan* (Malay operatic theatre). In the city, Awang lives with Pak Tua in his squatter house. Pak Tua is a reflection of a character in Syed Alwi’s play, Tok Perak who is also a famous medicine seller. The character is reminiscent of a real life actor, Khalid Salleh, a member of Anak Alam, before he became a dramatist and one of the finest actors in this country. He too was a real life medicine seller. Through his close relationship with Pak Tua, Awang is made aware of the harsh realities of life among the squatters. He observes how Pak Tua uses political connections to get things done and how the politicians, for their own gains, in turn used the

squatters who are generally poor and at the mercy of the politicians. Life in the squatter settlement is hard. There is no proper water and electricity supply and eviction is a daily nightmare. Thus, political connections are necessary for the squatters. In return, they have to support the political figures.

In the beginning of this play, Hatta shows us how the villagers, who have been used to a certain way of life, refuse to change or do things differently. This happens to Awang too and consequently, he has to leave. However, Awang is new to city life and he has to learn and adapt. He may not agree with the squatter's politics, but in the end what really matters is a true and honest friendship with Pak Tua and the other squatters.

“Anak Korporat” opens with the story of Mat Kecil, son of Cikgu Mim who is the headmaster at a primary school. Presently, besides being a headmaster, Cikgu Mim is also involved with a political party. For Cikgu Mim, his political involvement is geared towards serving the people. However, his wife, Seri does not share this vision. For her, politics could be the ticket to personal gain. This is articulated in the following excerpts taken from Scene One of the play:

CIKGU MIM: *Kegiatan politik saya untuk faedah semua orang. Itu kerja kebajikan tanggungjawab sosial. Saya tak pernah bercita-cita nak jadi orang politik untuk kepentingan peribadi.*

(My political activity is for the benefit of the people. It is social work, social responsibility. I've never aimed to participate in politics for personal gain.)

SERI: *Kawan awak tu percayakan awak. Dia nak awak tolong dia. Bila dah tolong tentulah ada balasan, takkan saja-saja nak tolong!*

(Your friend trusts you. He wants you to help him. Once you help him, there will be something in return.)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:118)

With recommendations from a friend in politics, Cikgu Mim obtains a position in a political party, and as a recognition of his contributions, is awarded the title of “Datuk”. This marks the beginning of a new life for the couple and Mat. Cikgu Mim transforms from a simple teacher into an important politician. Seri, too undergoes a transformation, from a simple housewife to someone who now plays golf, with a club membership. Mat grows up into a successful businessman, busy with corporate and business affairs around the world. Mat's world is a stark contrast to that of his parents. In “Anak Korporat”, Hatta criticizes the change in the attitude of

Malays who have transformed their socio-economic status through political connections. The success stories of these new Malays do not end happily. Mat's accomplishments in the corporate world do not last. He fails miserably, falls ill and returns to his family and village (*kampung*) to seek medical treatment. Ironically, Mat's life is parallel to that of his father's. After a successful stint in politics, Cikgu Mim returns his "Datukship" when he is humiliated and disgraced by some dishonest people who buy the title. In the same way, Mat, after jet-setting around the world, returns to his country and *kampung* for treatment of his illness. Hatta portrays the corruption in politics through opportunism, insincerity and dishonesty. The ugliness of the corporate world is symbolized by dishonesty, illness, sexual excess and hedonism. The symbolism is stated by Mat Kecil in an interesting way, in the opening rhyme of the play:

Mat Kecil: (*Membaca*). *Siakap senohong, gelama ikan duri, bercakap bohong, tak boleh jadi menteri. Siakap senohong, gelama ikan duri, bercakap bohong, tak boleh jadi menteri!*

[(Reading). Siakap, senohong, gelama, ikan duri!, liars cannot ministers be!
Siakap, senohong, gelama, ikan duri; liars cannot ministers be!]

Cikgu Mim: *Dah dipinda tu! Pantun asalnya begini: siakap senohong, gelama ikan duri, bercakap bohong, lama-lama mencuri!*

(That's been changed! The original rhyme is: Siakap, senohong, gelama, ikan duri; liars will one day thieves be.)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:116)

This rhyme literally means that someone who is prone to telling lies cannot be a minister. However, it is a modification of the original rhyme that someone who starts out by telling lies will inevitably end up stealing. Liars, thieves and robbers as well as corrupt leaders are the nightmare of the corporate world and politics. The same rhyme is repeated by Mat and Cikgu Mim at the ending scene of the play.

Interestingly, Hatta has positioned two important female roles in this play, Seri and Mak Long. Seri is the proverbial woman behind a successful man, and in this case, behind Cikgu Mim's foray into politics. As a mother, Seri instils in Mat the importance of an education. To Mat, his mother is stern and firm. On the other hand, Mak Long, the elder sister of Cikgu Mim is the rational voice. She is the only person who can persuade and advise Cikgu Mim and Mat. The moral of the story may be that once you have lost your soul, you have to return to your origins/roots to regain it. "Anak Korporat"

was staged in 1992 at the MATIC theatre (Pusat Pelancongan Malaysia), in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.

“Dunia Belum Kiamat” is not actually about Armageddon in the scriptural context, but instead, has a political message conveyed in a satirical and cynical form. Questions like, what would happen if there is no electricity, no water, no newspapers, no petrol, and your house is surrounded by doom and gloom with no movement at all? What would happen when all modern amenities that we are so dependent on stopped working? Total silence. People would feel lost and helpless. This sudden scenario of change happens for Datuk Jay, a successful businessman in his 50s, well known for his miserliness.

The time setting of “Dunia Belum Kiamat” starts in the morning when one thing after another fails. Datuk wants to read his usual morning papers, but the Indian newspaper supplier has stopped delivering it. There is no water in the bathroom, no electricity, so there is no coffee. What follows in the household can be described as pandemonium, because chaos, confusion and complete disorder set in. The confused Datuk Jay is affected by this and instructs that no one should leave the house as the world is coming to an end. He orders that they must stay at home and pray. He says:

DATUK JAY: *Degil budak tu!! Tadi aku dah cakap jangan keluar...dunia nak kiamat!!*
(What a stubborn child!! Didn't I say that no one is to go out... the world is coming to an end!!)

PAK ALIM: *Betul ke Datuk?*
(Is it true Datuk?)

DATUK JAY: *Betul!!!...semua orang jangan ke mana-mana...duduk dalam rumah... baca doa!!*
(It's true!!!...No one should go out ... stay at homepray!)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:210)

To Muniandy the Indian newspaper delivery boy, Datuk Jay says:

DATUK JAY: *Andy, Dengar ya. Sekarang saya kasi tahu sama awak...kita orang semua tunggu...dunia sudah mahu kiamat. Saya punya rumah, ini hari semua jem! Semua tak ada jalan. Luar sana, awak tengok, matahari pun tak keluar... kita semua nanti sudah tak duduk ini dunia lagi. Apa erti mahu cakap fasal hutang lagi?*

(Andy, listen. I'm telling you now,... we're all waiting...the world is coming to an end. Today, in my house, everything is jammed! Nothing's working. Look outside, even the sun has not come out... we will not be in this world much longer. What is the point of talking about debts?)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:217)

It is interesting that only Datuk Jay is affected and confused in this play, whereas the other characters, such as his wife Datin En, Katie, his daughter, his driver, his gardener, Mak Munah the house help and Muniandy are still sensible. There is an interesting psychological analysis to this character: is Datuk Jay in a subconscious state? In addition, his son Jamil who wants to be a filmmaker keeps trying to persuade Datuk Jay to finance his film entitled, "Waiting for the End of the World". "Dunia Belum Kiamat" is an amusing situational comedy. The absurd world of Datuk Jay comes back to reality when a television newscaster announces that there is no Armageddon. Also, the news about a debate between two parties, Pampas and Camno (possibly mocking Pas and Umno) is false. The world itself is not ending. Besides, the absurd looks of the TV newscaster needs to be explained.

"Cermin Tipu Daya" is one of the most interesting plays in this compilation. The story centres on the obsession of an ordinary man who wants to improve his life. Bujang Selamat takes part in a marathon, in which the winning prize is a mirror of tricks. This mirror has magical powers that can grant Bujang Selamat anything he dreams of. Nenek Kebayan articulates this as follows:

B/SELAMAT: *Nek! Apakah yang harus hamba lakukan dengan "Cermin Tipu Daya" ini?*

(Grandma! What should I do with this "Mirror of Tricks"?)

N/KEBAYAN: *Bercerminlah! Di dalamnya akan kau lihat segala keindahan, nikmat syurga yang tidak pernah termimpi olehmu selama ini.*

(Look into the mirror! In it you can see all the beauty, the heavenly pleasures that you never dreamed of in your life.)

B/SELAMAT: *Lagi nek?*

(What else, Grandma?)

N/KEBAYAN: *Sesungguhnya, kau yang memiliki "Cermin Tipu Daya" ini akan menjadi seorang yang amat..amat..*

(Truly, he who owns this "Mirror of Tricks" shall be most... most..)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:241)

From the magic mirror, a beautiful woman, Wan Sri Bulan, appears as a servant or slave to Bujang Selamat. From the time he wins the magic mirror, Bujang Selamat lives in fantasy, which he is unable to differentiate from reality. When Cik Ara, his wife, tries to wake him up from his fantasy, Bujang rebukes her.

B/SELAMAT: *Barangkali mata kau dah rabun. Kalau begitu, kau lihat diri aku ini! Lihat wajah aku, tubuh aku, pakaian aku! Apa perubahan yang kau nampak?*

(Perhaps your eyes are failing. If that is so, look at me! Look at my face, my body, my clothes! What changes do you see?)

CIK ARA: *Tak ada apa-apa! Wajah abang macam dulu juga...*

(Nothing, your face is just the same as before...)

B/SELAMAT: *Kau jangan cakap sesuka hati. Jangan main-main! Nanti kau dilaknat oleh "Cermin Tipu Daya" ni!*

(Don't be so free with your words. Don't play around or you'll be cursed by the "Mirror of Tricks"!)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:255-56)

This play uses an interesting concept. The present writer would argue that all the scenes or acts between Bujang Selamat, Nenek Kebayan and Cermin Tipu Daya do not actually happen. They are, at best, mind games. This is yet another of Hatta's psychological plays which seem rather simple on the surface. Arguably, it appears to be about a man's fantasy. However, the mind is perplexing. On re-reading the text we see how, after the run, the stage (space) light is switched off, and it becomes pitch dark. When the light is switched on again, only Nenek Kebayan appears on stage with the magic mirror. From then on, Bujang Selamat lives in his fantasy until Cik Ara comes in. She brings with her their broken mirror, and through this, Bujang Selamat is taken back to the real world. This play may be compared to *Blow-Up* (1966), a film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni in recreating reality in an abstract form in the film. The main character, Thomas, has grown weary of his daily job as a photographer, and begins to fantasize and recreate the reality of violence. At the end of the film, Thomas is seen to be back in the real world and the audience realises that all the scenes were merely a figment of his imagination.

Hatta confirms this interpretation in the Introduction to the play, that it is about ordinary people who fail to improve on their lives no matter how hard they work and so, look for a short-cut to wealth. But, this short-cut is merely in their imagination and fantasy. Hatta adds that life is a mirror for us to look at our real shadow, as well as the shadow or fantasy that can be imagined or dreamed about.

"Puteri Gunung Ledang" (PGL) is another political satire. Here, Hatta does not adhere to the classic myth of Puteri Gunung Ledang, but instead, creates an intriguing satire of the Sultan of Melaka. The Sultan was obsessed with marrying Puteri Gunung Ledang, whom he meets in a dream. The

princess herself is just a myth that does not exist. Hatta believes that classic stories such as the Malay *hikayat* can be reclaimed as modern narratives highlighting significant contemporary issues.

In PGL, the king entrusts his *pembesar* (court officials) to meet the princess who is believed to live at the peak of Gunung Ledang, a mountain which is situated between Malacca and Johor. On their journey to the peak, the *pembesar* are stopped by *Lelaki Rimba* (Forest Man) who insists on a permit as a procedure to allow people to cross the jungle.

LELAKI RIMBA: *Tempat ini kami punya. Semua orang mahu pakai, mesti bawa surat kebenaran.*

(This place is ours. Whoever wants to use it must have a permit, . . .)

PEMBESAR 1: *Surat kebenaran? Kebenaran apa?*

(Permit? What permit?)

LELAKI RIMBA: *Aku minta maaf! Sebenarnya bukan kami yang buat peraturan itu. Itu semua datang dari orang luar, di bandar sana. Aku pun tak tau siapa. Dia sudah datang sini, kasi tahu kami semua, tak boleh buat sesuka hati, semua mahu ikut peraturan. Dalam sungai tak boleh buang macam-macam, pokok tak boleh tebang, binatang pun ada yang tak boleh kena sumpit. Dulu kami semua senang, semua binatang boleh makan, pokok boleh tebang, dalam sungai boleh buang macam-macam!*

(I'm sorry! Actually we don't make the rules. All these came from elsewhere, from the city. I really don't know who they are. They came with instructions that we can't do as we like, we have to follow the rules. It is not allowed to throw rubbish in rivers or cut down trees, or hunt certain animals. Previously, life was much simpler, all animals could be eaten, trees could be felled, and rivers used as dumping grounds.)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:298)

The above excerpt indicates that the jungle is a protected area, out of bounds to outsiders. The jungle has its own rules - trees should not be cut down at will, animals should not be killed and rivers should not be polluted. These are the rules to maintain and guard the forest from being cleared by greedy and unscrupulous people. It is interesting to note that the high-ranking palace officials are given a lesson on sustainability and warned about forest intrusion and illegal logging. Such issues are contemporary and the cynicism could be due to hearsay and rumours of palace involvement in some of the logging activities. The cynical tone is apparent as the *Pembesar* looks towards Gunung Ledang and realises that there are a lot of trees left to be logged.

PEMBESAR II: *Ooo ini dia rupanya! Patutlah Sultan Mahmud beria-ia benar suruh kita ke mari, rupanya banyak lagi balak yang belum ditebang.*

(Ooo so that's it! No wonder Sultan Mahmud is so eager for us to come here, there is so much timber here for felling.

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:305)

P/G/TAHAN: *Baik, aku rasa kita minta binakan jalan raya. Bila sudah ada jalan raya semua kemajuan akan sampai ke sini. Kasut, ikan sardin, susu, rokok kretek semua boleh dibawa dengan mudah. Kalau kita sakit pun doktor mesti mahu datang. Kalau kita ada musuh, lori askar pun boleh datang segera.*

(Alright, I think we should request for a highway. Once that is done, development will increase here. Then it will be so easy to bring in shoes, sardines, milk and kretek cigarettes. If we fall ill, doctors will be able to reach us easily. If enemies were to attack, military aid can arrive quickly.)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:302)

These lines demonstrate the intelligence of Putera Gunung Tahan in delineating his strategies. Putera Gunung Tahan is a fictional character from the satirical novel "Putera Gunung Tahan" (1937) written by Ishak Haji Muhammad.

P/G/TAHAN: *Er...begini ya! Kita semua mesti ingat, ini zaman pembangunan, orang lain sudah jauh ke depan. Jadi kita mesti bertanding dengan mereka, jadi kita tak boleh main-main. Tak boleh buang masa.*

(Er...it's like this! We have to remember, this is the era of development, other people are way ahead of us. So, we must compete with them. No more playing around. No more wasting time.)

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:303)

Hence, Putera Gunung Tahan hands over the list of demands from Puteri Gunung Ledang to the palace officials. Among others, she wants the Sultan to build a highway that goes from Malacca to Gunung Ledang and on to Gunung Tahan and back.

PENGIKUT: *Lebuh raya itu hendaklah dibina dari sini ke Gunung Ledang, dari Gunung Ledang ke Gunung Tahan dan dari Gunung Tahan ke sini!*

(The highway should be built from here to Gunung Ledang, from Gunung Ledang to Gunung Tahan, and then back here!).

(*Dunia Belum Kiamat*, 2013:329)

If one is familiar with the totally impossible list of demands of the Princess in the original story, it may be noted that Hatta has changed it to one that is a more pragmatic and relevant to the needs of the people. It is this addition of an intellectual dimension that awakens the Sultan from his dream. Thus, the myth of Puteri Gunung Ledang has been transformed to reflect the needs of modern day living, beyond its classic setting.

What is interesting about this compilation is the open-endedness of the plot and structure of the plays. The dialogues in the plays are fresh, witty, sometimes wild but always meaningful. Even though his drama is presented mostly as a situational comedy (sitcom), we know the characters are trapped in social and economic developments. As Solehah Ishak mentioned in her Introduction to the publication in 2008, Hatta is deeply concerned about the inherent disparities in his society, the deeply-ingrained division and polarity between the rich and poor, the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the powerless, the leaders and the led. All of these parties have undergone close scrutiny in this compilation. Finally, all the plays in *Dunia Belum Kiamat* are fresh and entertaining. Hatta has outdone himself with his creativity, sharp wit and in-depth observation of contemporary Malaysian society.

NOTE

1. Literally: seabass, threadfin, whitefish, catfish. This list of fish is the first part of a traditional Malay pantun and functions only to set up the rhyme scheme for the poem without being related in meaning.

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