

BOOK REVIEW

Jelani Harun, Ben Murtagh (eds.), 2013.
***Esei Penghargaan kepada Profesor Emeritus V.I Braginsky Mengharungi Laut Sastera Melayu.* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 700 pages, ISBN 9789834609290.**

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THE SAILOR WHO DIVES TO THE DEPTHS OF THE OCEAN OF MALAY LITERATURE

Malay literature in its diverse genres has been an exotic source of attraction for some scholars, particularly among Western orientalists for several centuries and even to the present, when civilizations of the world traverse into the new millenium. Studies on the treasury of Malay letters is in fact almost tantamount to a “passion” for the West that competes with one another to explore and cross continents with the seductive mission and objective of “Gold, Glory, and Gospel.” Distant regions in the continents of Africa, the South Asian sub-continent and South East Asia have been targets of exploration and colonization, to civilize races they consider “uncivilized” precisely because these groups of communities are outside the frame of Western eurocentric motives.

In the Archipelago region or more specifically the mainland and insular territories, the richness of the treasury that has been discovered and reclaimed is not merely valuables like its spices and minerals, including the abundance of gold, but also the culture of letters which writers and intellectuals of communities in the Malay world produce and possess, which were perhaps never anticipated by the West. Writings of the Malays and products of literature and letters in oral and written form that represent roots of the

cultural heritage of its communities have evidenced the height of their cultural achievement in both oral and written traditions. This discovery has left an impact of captivation and fascination among its explorers. Thus the clergy, traders and colonials began to show a great interest in Malay manuscripts since as early as the 17th century with various objectives, with the study of various subjects of study according to individual tendencies, interests and agendas. Studies tend to connect Malay literature genetically with works or genres from highly civilized cultures outside the Malay world such as those of India and Persia. Generic and thematic studies are also conducted, based on diverse manuscripts and various genres of Malay literature.

Among scholars, a majority of whom originate from Western Europe, the name of Braginsky is among those who have shown a deep interest in investigating concepts, philosophies and universal views of Malay writers, especially in pre-Islamic Malay texts. His interest began while he was a student embarking on his studies at the University of Moscow. During that time he was able to obtain a thorough reading of the works of Hamzah Fansuri in Malay (see Pogadaev, 2013). His interest deepened and widened in its scope, right up to the level of Ph.D. Thus he has studied a large number of Malay works. In one of Braginsky's writings, a paper on "The Concept of the Beautiful (*Indah*) in Classical Malay Literature and its Muslim Roots" at the International Conference of Malay Studies in Kuala Lumpur, 8-10 September 1979, started up an in-depth interpretation of the meaning of various aspects of authorship, including the universal Malay perspective which is special and specific. Braginsky offered a profound and comprehensive interpretation through a discussion of the word *indah* and its variant form, *keindahan*, found in Malay literary works, linking it to the ontological meaning relating to glorification of the Creator. The word *indah* is also extended to more abstract meanings like astonishment, awe, marvel, amazement, and spectacle. In addition he presents the word, *indah* as a method of treatment or therapy, as may be found in stories of *penglipurlara* or "soother-of-sorrows" (Muhammad, 2000). His study of the meaning of the beautiful in the concept of Malay authorship and the philosophy behind the production of works was published in his book, *Erti Keindahan dan Keindahan Erti dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik* (The Meaning of Beauty and the Beauty of Meaning in Classical Malay Literature)(1994).

Braginsky's study on the concept of beauty and its profundity of meaning in Malay manuscripts in diverse genres reveals the intellectual height and genius of the Malays in writing from a universal perspective with clarity

and wisdom. His genetic study, particularly on aspects of mysticism and the influence of Persian poetry in the production of Malay literature shows the connection of the Malay world with great civilizations, which were formed over a long period, and yet, owing to the talent and virtuosity of Malay writers, did not produce adaptations or exact imitations. Instead, they made selective and discerning modifications to values from external civilizations to be appropriately woven into local values and norms into new forms. These provided specific attributes to the uniqueness of the wisdom and creativity of Malay writers in producing a magnum opus. Braginsky continued the momentum of his authoritative research when he followed and retraced the history and origins of particular sources of Malay literary works. Through collaborative research, it was finally possible to discover a prototype of the manuscript of *Taj-us-Salatin*. This contribution from Braginsky may be considered as a basis for the production of historical traditional Malay literary works that he studied while structuring the corpus of traditional Malay literature into three functional spheres, that is, the sphere of beauty, the sphere of benefit, and the sphere of spiritual perfection. Through this approach Braginsky meticulously analysed the academic and spiritual substance of Malay authorship since the 17th century.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka celebrates Braginsky's diligent work on Malay literature, particularly traditional Malay literature over four decades. The publication of this book, *Mengharungi Laut Sastera Melayu* or Crossing The Sea of Malay Literature, which contains 22 research essays by local and foreign scholars of Malay literature honouring Braginsky represent a recognition of his significant contribution to the study of traditional Malay literature.

In perusing the contents of the book, one finds no division of studies according to specific themes. Although some of the research essays in this book do not refer directly to Braginsky's writings, the spirit that emerges in the contributions do in fact have a connection to the fields and subjects of study which he has scrutinized, especially those relating to textual beauty, the genius of the thought of Malay authors and the universal viewpoint of Malay writers. Thus the breadth and meaning of a Malay text can be well-received. The writings included in this book demonstrate Braginsky's vast contribution to the study of Malay literature at the international level. The diversity of perspectives, variety of genres, breadth of manuscripts, genetic studies and scrutiny of historical aspects contained in the collection not only reinforce Braginsky's position in the world of Malay letters, but also refine

the contribution of the thought and tradition of the Malay genius which prioritizes the spiritual aspect and gives precedence to the value of wisdom.

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