ACADEMIC JOURNEY

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WRITING AN ACADEMIC PAPER ON A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

That day in October 1982. We had just completed the AAPA 1 programme 1982 at Den Pasar Bali. APPA is short for Apresiasi Puncak Penyair Asia 1982 (Asian Poets’ Appreciation Summit 1982). Twenty poets from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia attended the gathering. The representatives from Malaysia included Muhammad Haji Salleh, Siti Zainon Ismail and Ahmad Kamal Abdullah. Those from Indonesia were B.M. Syamsuddin, Putu Samar Gantang, A. Rahim Qahar, Zatuko, Amang Rahman, Dinullah Reyes, Diah Hadaning, D. Kemalawati and Ahmad Fahrawi. The manager of APPA brought us right up to Tuwabungkah across Danau Batur until we reached Sanggar Masadepan Kesusasteraan Dunia that belongs to Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana. The editor of Asiaweek’s literary column who was specially invited by the manager, Wirawan Sudewa, accompanied us.

Just after we had our lunch at the Beringin Cikini Restaurant we left for H.B. Jassin Documentation Centre in Taman Ismail Marzuki. Unexpectedly I saw H.B. Jassin with Liaw Yock Fang. H.B. Jassin was a little surprised. I thought, of course they would be having lunch now. I knew that H.B. Jassin was someone who really enjoyed meals that suited his taste. “Is it Kemala?” he asked. “Yes, bapak,” we shook hands. Liaw was in the process of studying and translating The Complete Poems of Chairi Anwar. H.B. Jassin was the consultant who would be putting the finishing touches to the manuscript. Liaw himself was a classical literature scholar in the Republic of Singapore.

I have read his book entitled Sejarah Kesusasteraan Melayu Klasik (A History of Classical Malay Literature). I also discovered that Liaw had studied the Qur’an and learnt Arabic for the purpose of researching works related to Malay and Islam.
“Your academic paper is good,” said the ‘priest’ of Indonesian literary criticism, referring to my Academic Exercise at the Humanities Department of Universiti Sains Malaysia which is entitled “Intelektualisme dan Alam dalam Puisi Latiff Mohidin dan Muhammad Haji Salleh” (“Intellectualism and Nature in the Poetry of Latiff Mohidin and Muhammad Haji Salleh”). Only then I realised that H.B. Jassin was the external expert who read my academic exercise.

“I gave you an A,” he continued. “Of course your supervisor gave you an A too, isn’t it?” I just smiled at his query. Let it be a secret! Surely, by now they would be hungry for nasi padang with kalio gravy, minang rendang, long brinjal fried in sambal and green chillies, I thought. We got up and left for PDS to look at books from Malaysia and APPA.

My academic exercise is concerned with looking for differences in the meaning of intellectualism between the western and Islamic interpretations. Islam often refers to manners and akidah (the belief in Allah). By referring to the Qur’ān and hadith or traditions, Malay writers are firmly committed to their faith. The Islamic intellect is based on the pillar of tauhid (belief in the oneness of God). That Allah created the world and knowledge. Intellectuals or the bright minds who deviate from this conviction in the pillars of faith and pillars of Islam will easily be led astray from their faith. Intellectualism that is too liberal makes one convinced that the world and individualism are everything. Whereas every atom of creation in the universe and on earth are under Allah’s will. This is the essence that I focus on in my academic exercise. Latiff Mohidin and Muhammad Haji Salleh in my research as Malay Islamic writers were looked at in this context. I quote Al-Ghazali in Mishkat al Anwar (The Niche of Lights) 1979:

>Cahaya membawa makna untuk Alam dan Ketuhanan itu sendiri. 
Alan Ketuhanan dirujuk sebagai cahaya, nur, sinar dan sinaran. 
Mereka menyedari 
Hakikat kurniaan Ilahi kepada benda, makhluk danalam. 
Kesemuanya menjadi bererti (hanya) setelah dilimpahi cahaya atau Nur Ilahiyyah. 
Dengan Nur-Nya itulah yang akan mengukuhkan perjalanan ilmu dan bakatnya, mengenal kekudusan Maha Pencipta, mengukuhkan keimanan.”
“Light gives meaning to the world and the Divine itself. The realm of the Divine is referred to as nur, light, rays or beams of light, illumination. They realise the truth of God bestowing His objects, creation and the universe with this Light. All become meaningful only when the Divine Light shines on it. With this light one’s knowledge and talents will be strengthened, in seeking to know the Creator, and fortify one’s faith]

(Landskap Ungu 2010, p. 281)

Islamic literary works are undertaken with the belief in Allah’s acceptance. With regard to this, Syed Qutb said, “For example, an Islamic literary author can write about the calmness of the morning and the silence of the night, as long as the work he creates is done in full awareness and faith in Allah, then that creation can be accepted as Islamic literature.” Syed Qutb rejects works that are dark, filled with extreme ambiguity (Landskap Ungu, 2010, p. 282).

I took the universal Islamic viewpoint to be in line with this Islamic conception. For my master’s degree I wrote a thesis entitled “Unsur-unsur Islam dalam Puisi Melayu Moden” (Islamic Elements in Modern Malay Poetry) which I completed at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1984. I was attracted to the poems by Nahmar Jamil, Marhan, Ali Haji Ahmad, Firdaus Abdullah, A. Wahab Ali, Adi Rumi, Yahya M.S and Badaruddin H.O. who consistently wrote poetry with Islamic elements. The Islamic poems written by Nahmar Jamil and Ali Haji Ahmad were awarded the Malaysian Literature Prize organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. In 1980 Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka not only sponsored the Malaysian Literature Prize for creative works and critiques but also creative works and critiques in series. Later, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka organized the Mastera Literature Award for literary works in South East Asia including Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. I had the opportunity to be on the panel for the Malaysian Literature Prize and the Mastera Award. And with the support shown by YAB Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka created the National Laureate Award in 1981 for Malaysian literary writers who achieve the highest rung in their creative works. The winner of the National Laureate Award for that year was Kamaludin Muhammad (Keris Mas).

When I visited Europe and Russia in 1989 with the purpose of identifying and learning about the Malay and Indonesian Studies Department, my mission was also to look at the possibility of establishing a Malay Studies Chair either
in Moscow or London and also in Leiden. I interviewed academicians who did their research at SOAS London, UNRS Paris, Leiden University, Kohn and also Moscow. I met researchers of Malay Indonesian literature E.U. Kratz, V.I. Braginsky, Annabel Gallop, Henk Meir, A. Teeuw, Boris Parnickle, Alexandre Ogloblin. Up to 1989, the year of my visit to Europe, there were only five Malay National Laureates. They were Keris Mas (1981), Shahnun Ahmad (1982), Usman Awang (1983), A. Samad Said (1985) and Arena Wati (1987). As literary laureates they were greatly honoured and awarded RM30 000 with the government printing 50 000 copies of their best works and the government purchased the books for school libraries in Malaysia. They were also given first class treatment at government hospitals.

From London to Paris, to Leiden and Kohn and at my last stop at Gorky Institute of World Literature, the favourite question they asked me was about the status of Malaysian National Laureates whom they consider special and extraordinary. A barrage of questions greeted me when I faced 20 professors of Comparative Literature at Gorky Institute. Professor Boris was the moderator of the session. His introduction touched on my personal details as a literary writer and researcher in Malaysia, an officer of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and also Head of the writers’ associations GAPENA and PENA. This introduction by the professor had the effect of introducing a new persona to the other professors who attended the event.

Many questions were put forward and I was asked to answer them. They were also interested to know more about the writers’ associations in Malaysia, the Kuala lumpur Poetry Declamation and Dewan Sastera, the one and only literary magazine in Malaysia. And that too was published at the insistence of the delegates at the special session of the establishment of GAPENA in October 1970. Weren’t there any other journals of better quality and could they contribute towards it? These questions came from professors who filled the literary chairs for Chinese, Benggali, Urdu, Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Turkish, Persian and others at the Gorky Institute of world literature. It seems that they were very eager to meet prominent figures like Arena Wati, A. Samad Said, Usman Awang and Keris Mas. They wanted to read the short stories collection *Patah Tumbuh*, the novels *Rimba Harapan*, *Salina*, *Lingkaran*, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* and the anthology *Gelombang*.

They wanted to know about the special quality of these Malay works. It must be mentioned here that Malay classical literature had always been a source of exotic material for orientalists and occidentalists since hundreds of years ago. Classical Malay literature, *hikayat*, *syair* and poetry books, songs
like gurindam, tembang and kinanti had been used as reference and research material. Can modern Malay literature be at par with world literature such as Kawabata and Rabindranath Tagore and be recognised by the Nobel Prize? This is a puzzle to them. The National Literature Award, to them is a new development in Malaysia. Where in the world are literary writers honoured as in Malaysia. In order to clarify their doubts, I let them know about Jurnal Tenggara, Dewan Bahasa, Malay Literature, Dewan Budaya, Dewan Masyarakat and others. I also told them about A. Teeuw’s views of Salina and Lingkaran which have attained international standard. Diplomatically, I expressed and hoped for world recognition of Contemporary Malay literature as much as classical Malay literature had received.

In Moscow, I had the opportunity to visit Leo Tolstoy Museum at the Kremlin and meet Malay-Indonesian scholars at Ukraine Hotel. We exchanged ideas about Malay and Indonesian literature. I was able to read my long poem “From the window of Ukraine Hotel October 1989”. I boarded the night train with Dr. Vilen Sikorsky from Moscow to St Petersburg. Although our coach was full of Russian troops in their uniforms we arrived safely early the following morning. Dr. Alexandre Ogloblin brought me to St Petersburg Library to look at the Malay literature collection which had been kept with great care. For me, Russia is a country of a thousand museums. All the big cities in Russia have museums. In front of the Russian Museum proudly stands the statue of a great Russian poet, Alexandre Pushkin. I also was able to visit Puskin’s original house which has been turned into a special museum. Inside there are antiques including the manuscripts of Pushkin’s poetry in his beautiful handwriting. This surely is an attraction for visitors. On returning to Kuala Lumpur I wrote this poem to preserve my memory of this visit to Pushkin’s house:

**Di Muzium Pushkin**
*(buat Ogloblin)*

Puisi-puisimu berombak
Dari kamar ke kamar
Sang isteri
Pemecah nestapa
Harga diri tapi
Bukan si bisu
Bukan si tuli
Dari mata dan bibir
Wanita periwayat itu

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**[At Pushkin’s Museum)**
*(for Ogloblin)*

Your poems reverberate
From room to room
The wife
Scatters the gloom
Pride but
Not the mute
Not the deaf
From the eyes and lips
The lady narrator seems
My dissertation for PHD at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, “Symbolism in Islamic Poetry in Malaysia 1970-1990” refers to 24 books of Malaysian Malay Islamic Poetry by 22 poets. I registered for the course after my retirement from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. As the research moved towards Islam with reference to the Light theory by al-Ghazali, Takmillah by Shafie Abu Bakar and Sufi Symbolism by Javad Nurbaksh, it became clear that Malay literature for Islamic Malay literary writers must be guided by the Qur’an and Sunnah.

My last position was as the Head of Comparative Literature Division. I had worked in the field of language and literature for almost 30 years. Starting with the post of editor, the editorial staff of the magazines Dewan Pelajar, Dewan Sastera, Dewan Bahasa and Dewan Budaya, then graduating with my first degree at Universiti Sains Malaysia after which I was appointed Head of Modern Literature Unit, acting Head of Literature Division and finally as Head of Comparative Literature Division.

In line with my last appointment, and with Dewan Bahasa’s director-general, Datuk Haji Jumaat’s recommendation, my friends from Dewan
Bahasa dan Pustaka, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and I set up the Malaysian Comparative Literature Association in 1993. There were at least four main activities that we organized: (1) International Writing Competition (2) Great Malay Classical Literature Seminar (3) Nusantara Islamic Women Authorship Seminar (4) We also participated in the Comparative Literature Seminar in Hong Kong (1990) and in Tokyo (1992) organised by ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association). This activity garnered enthusiastic response from lovers of literature in Nusantara and in Asia, Europe and USA, Canada and Latin America.

I would also like to mention that my talent lies not only in writing creative poetry, short stories and plays. I also write articles and literary essays. This talent emerged when I was a student at the Tanjung Malim Teachers College, Perak (1958-1962). Another talent is leadership in associations. I became Head of the Malay Language Association, Chairman of Literature of MPSI Students’ Association and chief writer for Cenderamata. With these talents I began work at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (1968-1996).

In addition to my work at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, I was active in PENA and GAPENA. I was able to propose, with God’s consent, that a World Poetry Recital Program (1986) be organised in Kuala Lumpur. Scores of world poets congregated in Kuala Lumpur. They recited poetry and discussed poetry’s connection to love and humanity. They brought home to their own countries translated Malay literature that had been published in newspapers, journals and anthologies. After a successful debut with Kuala Lumpur showcasing world poetry, the festival then lost its shine from the year 2000 and died a natural death.

However, after I retired (January 1996), I became creative lecturer at University of Malaya and then Guest Scholar at Universiti Putra (2008-2015). Three meaningful events occurred while I was at UPM. In 2010 I gave a lecture in the Penabayu Series with the title “Numera’s Holistic Literary Writers’ Contribution”. In 2011 I was awarded the 11th Malaysian National Laureate title. In 2015 I received the Khattak Award from Dhaka Bangladesh.

Malaysia’s Numera Literary Writers’ Association was formed in 2012. Numera Malaysia established the Award for Malay literary writers whose creativity and research have elevated Malay literature onto the international arena. Numera Malaysia has given recognition to the following in various categories: six prominent figures for the Numera World literature Award namely Dr. Abdul Hadi W.M., Dr. Victor Pogadaev, Dr. Shafi’e Abu Bakar (2013), Professor Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh, Aminur Rahman (2016), Hudan
Hidayat (2017); five prominent figures for Numera Patria Award namely Tan Sri Salim Fateh Din, Tan Sri Hamad Kama Piah, Datuk Dr. Awang Sariyan (2015), Dr. Ir Wan Abu Bakar Wan Abbas, Putu Ikhirma (2017) and four prominent figures for Numera Serikandi Award namely Datin Jawahir, Datin Saroja Basri (2015), Sastri Bakry (2016) and Norazimah Abu Bakar (2017).

In 1992 I delivered a paper entitled “Langkan Keindahan dalam Puisi Melayu” at SOAS, London. I suggested how much Latiff Mohidin was influenced by Kabir with his upside-down technique that employs strange hyperbolic phrases such as “ants eat dragons”, “swallows defeat phoenix”, and so forth. This feature is abundantly found in Kabir’s poems. I also suggested that researchers and lovers of Malay poetry see the possibility of the poetic features in new poets such as Zaen Kasturi, Shafie Abu Bakar and Lim Swee Tin. At this meet, Usman Awang’s “The Death of a Warrior” was performed by Eman Manan, Shaharuddin Tambi and Kuza. In addition, there were poetry recitations by Usman Awang, Kemala, Ghafar Ibrahim, Siti Zainon Ismail and Kassim Ahmad at Box Theatre, South bank, London.


In September 1993, I participated in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. In addition to reciting poetry at various locations on campus I gave a talk on Contemporary Malay Literature in Malaysia. My talk focussed on the works of literary activists Ishak Hj Muhammad with his novel *Putera Gunung Tahan*, A Samad Ismail with his novel *Tembok Tidak Tinggi* and Journalism Features. Ishak’s and A. Samad Ismail’s unfading idealism attracted the IWP participants. They were so committed to their cause they were ready to be imprisoned by the British.

Brainstorming by 30 world writers from China, Russia, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, Latin America, Nigeria, Kenya, Romania, India, England and other countries produced new ideas and at the same time demonstrated the provocation and snobbishness of writers from powerful nations who attended. On the other hand, they were able to learn about contemporary and classical literature of the countries whose writers they were just getting to know. The program gave them new information.
At this time too, I began writing a collection of poems, *MIM*. Several of the early poems had been discussed in a group session of writers who were candidates of the Master’s degree. The difference between Islamic and western philosophies seemed to surprise them. Luckily, I was aided by IWP participants from I’tidal Cairo who helped to clarify the meaning of the oneness of God, the meaning of akidah and spiritualism as referred to in the Qur’an and Sunnah. *MIM* was begun in the fall, 1993 and completed three years later (1996). It was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1999. The *MIM* anthology won the National Literature Award for Individual Groups for 1998/1999.

I was fortunate as I had the opportunity to listen to W.S. Merwin’s talk and poetry reading. He’s an American poet who was influenced in a big way by the beauty and philosophy of the East. He was in India and other Asian countries for a long time. The eastern values of family ties, love of nature and the universe are reflected in his poems. I was able to compare his poetry with that of Alias Taib and completed a comparative study “T. Alias and W.S. Martin: Surrealism, Nature and the Soul of the East”, the essence of which I am quoting here:

*Ungkapannya yang bersahaja dan Teka teki atau daya magisme yang ingin dilahirkan daripada puisinya tidak jauh berbeza daripada T.Alias Taib. Mereka berjaya memanfaatkan daya imaginasi dan mencipta metafora yang segar dengan puisi yang berjaya daripada kumpulan karya Opera dan The Rain In The Trees. Kedua-duanya menghargai alam dan nilai kekeluargaan dan kemanusiaan.*

[His open expressions and the Riddle or magical quality which he wishes to derive from his poems is not very different from that of T. Alias Taib. They were able to make use of the imagination and create fresh metaphors with successful poetry from the *Opera* collection and *The Rain in the Trees*. Both have a great respect for nature and family ties and humanity.]

*(Puisi Melayu Dunia, 2011, p. 261)*

In the year 1999, Universti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s Senate Committee approved my dissertation “Symbolism in Islamic Poetry in Malaysia 1970-1990”. I received my PHD (Malay Literature) in March 2000 in a convocation ceremony. I am thankful that I have been able to explain where exactly the status of the Islamic literary writer or poet in his creation is. As Islamic poets they embrace the Qur’an and Sunnah. There is an appropriate theory approach
with these Islamic poets, among them the Takmilah theory by Dr. Shafie Abu Bakar, Pengkaedahan Melayu by Dr. Hashim Awang dan Teksdealisme by Dr. Abdul Rahman Hanafiah.

In this study I have proven that much of the symbolism in Islamic poetry in Malaysia is appropriate and in line with al-Ghazali’s al-Nuur symbolism theory in Misykat al-Anwar (Niche of Lights) (1979) and Sufi Symbolism by Javad Nurbakhsh in Sufi Symbolism (1984). We are hopeful that “the resonance of Malaysian Islamic Poetry in particular and poetry in the Islamic world will become more melodic, beautiful and poignant as well as be a blessing for mankind” (Simbolisme dalam Puisi Islam di Malaysia 1970-1990, 2010 p. 442).

Hudan Hidayat’s reaction to this book was: “To me, if we were to truly work on ... then Malay Islamic literature emerges with a hand holding a pearl, to me it is (for example) Kemala’s MIM, Kemala’s ayn and the dissertation: “Islamic Poetry Symbolism”. That is the pearl that we must put at par with world class literary poems. Our recommendation is based on the Purity of the Journey towards Him (in these works)” (Sastra Melayu Islam, 2017, p. 223).


The journey of a Malay Islamic poet is a spiritual journey of submission. This will inspire creativity and discovery of points of view in academic articles based on the belief in the oneness of God and upholding the akidah guided by the Qur’an and Sunnah. This is what I have inserted in my creative works and academic articles during this long and spiritual journey.

REFERENCES


