

Masturah Alatas, *The Life in the Writing: Syed Hussein Alatas*. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2010. 152 pp. ISBN 978-967-303-579-3.

The Life in the Writing: Syed Hussein Alatas starts off as a simple, straightforward endeavour – a daughter’s attempt to capture the essence of her father through his “writing life” (8). “It is amazing how much more we learn about our fathers through their writing” (76). It helps that her father is Syed Hussein Alatas.

For anyone who may not know, Syed was a sociologist, a scholar, a politician, an intellectual, an academician. He is the author of *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), a valuable contribution to Malaysian historiography and postcolonial scholarship. In fact the text drew the attention of renowned postcolonial theorist, Edward Said who, in *Culture and Imperialism*, described *The Myth of the Lazy Native* as “startlingly original” (50). Syed was also Vice Chancellor of University Malaya in the 1980s. A strong opponent of corruption, he was, even towards the end of his life, working on a book about evil.

But what we get from Masturah Alatas’s book is the private visage of Syed. Her approach to her subject matter is delicate and personal as she meanders into the past to draw out images and conversations with the man she calls “Abah.” There are many glimpses of Syed that only a family member can provide and these, plus the rare photos of the handsome young man who would grow to resemble Fidel Castro, paint an intimate picture of Syed. There are touching details in this book. For example Syed, even after he had fallen ill, would still frequent the Amcorp Mall Sunday flea market in search of good books, “books that were being abandoned in Malaysia would somehow find their way back into his house” (126). And the chapter on Syed’s death will leave you with a heavy sense of pathos. But one of the most enduring images comes from an early scene that Masturah sketches for us – that of the bearded Syed in sarong and shirt, sitting at the dining table past midnight ballpoint pen in hand busily writing. It is an endearing image and quickly becomes for us what it represents for Masturah, “the image of a man who devoted his whole existence to the intellectual life, a man who, when he was not writing, was thinking obsessively about what he was going to write next” (20).

Masturah in drawing our attention to the writer in Syed has astutely chosen a defining dimension of this multi-faceted individual. He loved to read, he loved to write. And his writings reveal a man who was observant and attentive to life, whose thinking was fair and just without any obvious biases. He was of a progressive mindset, battling extremist, irrational thinking whether it came from the West or the East and keen to improve Malaysian paradigms of

thinking. He was objective in his assessment of Western influence, knew when it stifled and when it enriched.

In the chapter, "Refute a Book with Another Book," Masturah provides excerpts from Syed's various publications. They make a lively collection. He has a learned, measured style of writing, a polite way in which he formulates an argument, gradually creating a scenario to then reveal a pertinent point. This style surely must have captured the attention of a lecture hall full of students. Syed's ideas often have an ironic twist. One of my favourite excerpts is from chapter 6. Here Syed studies the relation between Dutch governor generals of Indonesia and the insects of Indonesia and from that draws a conclusion on colonial heritage! It is an unusual, novel comparison and his conclusion is insightful.

As the book develops, it becomes clear the author is bewildered as to why her father's intellectual contributions seem to receive greater recognition overseas than at home. Sadly, Syed himself sensed that he could not elicit a critical response from his own country. During an interview with a journalist in 2005 he calls himself "a useless sociologist" since, he said, "I am not in a position to influence planning or execute anything?" (78). In the book, Masturah raises some questions which require a sociologist to answer, hopefully one of Syed's calibre.

While the book in part is the tender homage of a daughter to her father for showing her a way of life, i.e. one dedicated to the written word, it also serves another purpose. In her preface Masturah states that her book is a way for those who knew him to revisit Syed and his works, and a means to introduce him to a new generation of Malaysians who may have never heard of him. The latter purpose is, to my mind, rather urgent. There is much to be gained from the writings of Syed. He was socially aware and the slant of his thinking encourages debate and discussion. From the excerpts it is clear that Syed was ahead of his time. It is hoped this book will be a catalyst to rekindle interest in Syed's writings, and to reveal the relevance of his ideas towards shaping intellectual, if not political, thinking.

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