

Introducing a Brunei Woman Writer: An Interview with Dayang Hajah Norsiah Abdul Gapar

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Not much is known about Brunei's women writers, but an unpublished paper by Hj. Markandi Hj. Kuris entitled "Ideologi Sastera Penulis Prempuan Brunei" (Literary Ideology of Brunei Women Writers) offers some impressions on the state of contemporary women writers in the country. According to Markandi, most Brunei women writers write poetry and there are very few who write fiction, be it in the form of short story or novel (3). Markandi also points out that most of these women writers deal with their day to day issues which affect them. These include falling in love (and the conflicts that come with it), marriage and its challenges, plights of single mothers, struggles of women wanting to fulfil their ambitions, and filial ties between children and their parents (4). Markandi hints at the triviality of themes addressed by most women writers in Brunei, but he is all praise for one particular writer, Dayang Hajah Norsiah Abd Gapar.

Dayang Hajah Norsiah Abd. Gapar was one of the SEA Write Award winners for 2009. She was born on 24 April 1952 in Pekan Seria, Kuala Belait and is one of Brunei's most accomplished women writers. Markandi cites Lufti Abas in *Bahana* (36) who wrote of Norsiah as Brunei's rare intellectual woman writer who tirelessly captures or tries to enhance Brunei's civility in her writings (Markandi 9).

Dayang Hajah Norsiah Abd. Gapar is known for her novel *Pengabdian* (Submission), published in 2010 (7th edition) and her collection of short stories *Tsunami di Hatinya* (Tsunami in Her Heart), published in 2009.

I had the honour of meeting and talking with the writer recently. The interview took place in Brunei in April 2011.

¹ Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf is a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia. She is on the editorial board of various international journals, and a member of the Southeast Asian Literature Council (Mastera). She was a Fulbright scholar at Cornell University, New York, in 2006/07. Her works include *The Islamic Interpretation of 'Tragic Hero' in Shakespearean Tragedies* (IIUM Press, 2001) and *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women's Writing in English, 1940s-1990s* (IIUM Press, 2001). She is also a bilingual creative writer and has published a collection of poems entitled *In the Art of Naming: A Muslim Woman's Journey* (2006).

Tell us a bit more about your educational background.

I had my first education at Sekolah Melayu Muhammad Alam, from 1960 to 1963. I entered Maktab Anthony, Seria in 1964 for my high school education. In 1972, I enrolled at Southampton Technical College, Hampshire, United Kingdom. After spending two years there, I pursued my BSc (Hons) in Biochemistry (Medical) at the University of Surrey, Guildford. Finally, I went to the University of London to study MSc in Clinical Chemistry and graduated from there in 1997.

What are your publications so far?

I have numerous anthologies. My first anthology was *Hidup Ibarat Sungai* (Life is Like a River), published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in 1972. It was followed by *Bunga Rampai Sastera Melayu Brunei* (Potpourri of Brunei Malay Literature) in 1984. In 1985, I published *Puncak Bicara* (Peak of Conversation). *Pengabdian* is my first solo publication. It was made into a text book, and was reprinted by DBP in 1987, 2001, 2002 and 2007. In 1988, *Antologi Cerpen Wanita Brunei Awan Putih Berarak Damai* (White Clouds Peace March: An Anthology of Short Stories by Brunei Women Writers) was published, and in 2007 another novel meant for adolescent readers was published, entitled *Janji Kepada Inah* (A Promise for Inah). Lastly, an anthology of short stories entitled *Kumpulan Cerpen Tsunami di Hatinya* came out in 2009.

Pengabdian was published as a textbook and this is indeed an achievement for any writer. Why do you think that the book was such a success especially among young readers?

The book was not immediately accepted as it dealt with taboo subjects including issues surrounding abortion. It took 20 years for the issue of abortion to be accepted by the general public as something beyond just a moral issue. The novel also dealt with issues of humanity, politics, economics, culture and religion. Basically, this novel represents women's perspectives through the main character who is highly educated and trained in the West and how she is opposed to the stereotyping of western educated women as those who would forget their religion and tradition. I tried to deal with a lot of misconceptions about educated women (especially educated in the West). I think the book was warmly received particularly by young people (female) because I reflected life as it was and people could relate easily to what I wrote.

Asian writers are always confronted with accusations that they do not write creatively because their stories are stories of themselves or others they know. Do you agree with this?

For my *Pengabdian* novel, I used my immediate surroundings because I needed to capture what I was experiencing. So yes, there was an element of autobiography in it. I was working at a hospital then and my hospital life became an inspiration for me to write especially on the issue of abortion. You'd see it happen to people you know too and I am fortunate that I have a very supportive family and an understanding husband who would encourage me to write without fear or favour.

Which writer would you consider as a major influence in your writing life?

I would definitely name Abdullah Hussain, a dear friend of mine. He gave me much encouragement, and I also read his works for inspiration.

Your final publication, 'Tsunami di Hatinya' is an interesting work. Can you share with our Asiatic readers a bit more about this anthology?

Tsunami di Hatinya is one of the stories in the anthology with the same title and it tells the story of a married couple with four children whose marriage goes wrong as it grows older. The couple lives loveless and uncommunicative ever since the wife discovered that the husband was having an affair with his secretary. It's your modern living drama but when I wrote it, it was not readily discussed in Brunei. Today divorces happen quite frequently in the Muslim society, and Brunei is not an exception. Though the husband in the story decides not to marry his girlfriend, the end suggests that he might have died in Phuket in the tsunami while dating his mistress.

What do you think of the reception of literature in Brunei? Do you think it has gained a lot of readers over the past few years?

Local literature is beginning to be accepted in Brunei. Though I must say because of our bilingual background, many youths tend to pick up English books more than those written in Bahasa Brunei. Nonetheless, I am glad that *sastera* (literature) is a required subject in school or else, this important discipline would be phased out slowly and very few would bother to know or read Brunei literature. I also feel that poor marketing contributes to our poor readership or bad sales of Brunei literature books. Sometimes, 500 copies of books are very hard to sell, so at the end we have to distribute them at schools for free.

Dayang Hajah, thank you so much for the interview.

It's my pleasure.

Works Cited

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