ASEAN 20TH CENTURY LITERATURES

Selected Poems and Short Stories from
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
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INTRODUCTION

ASEAN 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE

Brunei Darussalam has been an ASEAN member for 29 years now, since 8 January 1984. Throughout 29 years of Brunei Darussalam’s independence, lots of the literary works produced in that particular century reflects the nation’s noble values and cultural traditions that support the nation’s philosophy of Malay Islamic Monarchy (Melayu Islam Beraja – MIB)

As the nation’s philosophy, MIB is also the pillar of Brunei Darussalam, a Malay nation based on the principles of Islam. This concept had long been in existence; however it was only accentuated on 01 January 1984 during the proclamation of Brunei Darussalam’s independence.

This concept is often uplifted as the soul in literary works’ creation especially in poetry as an attempt to generate community thinking and appreciation towards the concept. Most of the creative works, especially poems that was produced in Brunei Darussalam are in the form of community moral development by instilling the sense of monotheism to Allah and inculcate sacred life values based on Islam.

Six poems written by eminent writers from Brunei Darussalam are selected. These chosen works are believed to have reached a high level of excellence and presenting the cultural identity, written by writers who have produced literary works from the 60s until the 90s. These works are recognized as a signature with everlasting effect and influence to the nation’s thinkers; a reference in shaping life views of the nation throughout the era. They are rich with cultural memoir such as the Bruneian dialect, figurative languages, historical background, life and work culture and greetings and salutations. Those elements form the strength in each poem produced because it is a
reflection of dignity of the Brunei people. Cultural values are often maintained in Brunei’s literary works which symbolized the nation’s identity.

1. Yang Amat Mulia Pengiran Setia Negara Pengiran Haji Mohd. Yusof bin Pengiran Haji Abdul Halim (Yura Halim)  
   “Tangisan Terjajah” (Tears of the Colonised) Loyang Tua Balan Berkais, (1993)

2. Yang Berhormat (The Honourable) Pehin Siraja Khatib Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Yahya bin Haji Ibrahim (Yahya M.S)  

3. Awang Haji Johari bin Mohd. Tarif (Johari Tarif)  
   “Dari Kota Tidur” (From the Sleeping City)

4. Awang Haji Jawawi bin Haji Ahmad (HJR)  
   “Kampongku” (My Village) Jam Meja, (1996)

5. Awang Haji Moksin bin Haji Abd. Kadir (K. Manis)  

6. Awang Hamzah bin Haji Suhaili (Tinta Merah)  
   “Traktor Menyongsong Tanah” (The Excavation) – Dalam Bulatan,

PERSONALITY AND AUTHORSHIP OF POETRY WRITERS

1. Yang Amat Mulia Pengiran Setia Negara Pengiran Haji Mohd. Yusof bin Pg Hj Abdul Halim, or better known as Yura Halim is no stranger to the world of literature, culture and history in Brunei Darussalam. He was one of the SEA Write Award recipients in 1993 through his book, Loyang Tua Balan Berkias. He is a very talented poetry writer and with his natural nature, diverse employment experiences in the government sector and environmental influences had led him producing poems on
patriotism, the love for nation and its people. His poem, ‘Tangisan Terjajah’ (Tears of the Colonised) in Loyang Tua Balan Berkias book, has managed to leave everlasting print on arts and culture, social and humanity and inciting awareness and reminiscence of its people throughout the history.

2. Yang Berhormat Pehin Siraja Khatib Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Yahya bin Haji Ibrahim or his pseudonym Yahya MS is an influential religious figure in Brunei Darussalam. He was one of the SEA Write Award recipients in 1987. His poem, ‘Pulau Chermin’ in his book, Perjalanan Malam Kalimantan Menuju Siang showed that unity and understanding is important for the peace and harmony of a country. Lesson learnt from it was that every disagreement should be resolved by negotiations for the sake of unity and harmony for the nation and the people.

3. Awang Hj Johari bin Mohd. Tarif or his pseudonym Johari Tarif started writing in the 1960s. He is one of the writers during his time who are very thoughtful on the current development and has been able to develop the nation economically, politically and culturally through literary works. His critical writings in the genre of poetry, allow him to receive recognition such as First Prize Winner of the Poem Writing Contest in conjunction with His Majesty Paduka Seri Baginda Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam Silver Jubilee Celebration.

4. Awang Haji Jawawi bin Haji Ahmad or his pseudonym HJR wrote poetries since 1966. His works had been published in many foreign and local journals. He is one of the SEA Write Award recipients in 2004. He is an avid poetry reader and has represented the country, among which include: ASEAN Poetry Night, Kuala Lumpur, 1992; World Poetry Recital, Kuala Lumpur, 1994; World Cities Poetry Recital, Kuching, Sarawak, 2003; and Poetry Night, Literary Event in Korea.

5. Awang Hj Moksin bin Haji Abd. Kadir, or better known as K.Manis was one of the SEA Write Award recipients in 2007. He has been actively involved in writings for over
50 years. His works are mainly comprehending and illustrating various life issues in literary works specifically in the genre of poems such as those that had been published like Jalan-Jalan Berjalan Jalan, DBP, (1998), Wajah, DBP (2007) and Daun, published by Cultural and Arts Association (Persatuan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian- B2K), Tutong, (2011).

6. Awang Hamzah bin Haji Awang Suhailli, or better known as Tinta Merah begun writing in 1979 and has wrote more than 200 poems. He was an active writer in the 90s.
dipilih adalah dari kalangan penulis yang melahirkan karya dari zaman 60-an hingga ke zaman 90-an. Karya-karya yang dipilih telah diperakui pernah meninggalkan kesan atau pengaruh yang kekal dalam ingatan para pemikir bangsa, yang dijadikan rujukan untuk membentuk pandangan hidup bersama bangsa sepanjang zaman. Karya-karya yang dipilih merupakan karya yang kaya dengan unsur kenangan kebudayaan yang merujuk kepada dialek kebruneian, bahasa kiasan, latar belakang sejarah, budaya kehidupan, budaya kerja, kata sapaan. Unsur tersebut menjadi kekuatan dalam setiap puisi yang dihasilkan kerana ia merupakan cerminan bangsa Brunei yang bermartabat. Nilai-nilai kebudayaan tersebut sering dikekalkan dalam karya sastera Brunei yang melambangkan identiti sesebuah negara.


1. Yang Amat Mulia Pengiran Setia Negara Pengiran Haji Mohd. Yusof bin Pengiran Haji Abdul Rahim (Yura Halim)
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2. Yang Berhormat Pehin Siraja Khatib Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Yahya bin Haji Ibrahim (Yahya M.S)

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“Traktor Menyongsong Tanah” – Dalam Bulatan,

KETOKOHAN DAN KEPENGARANGAN PENULIS SAJAK


DARI KOTA TIDUR

by Johari Tarif

Dunia kami adalah sebuah kota
kecil tetapi indah
kecil tetapi makmur
Darussalam, kota yang menaja kemakmuran
Darussalam, kota yang menaja keindahan
Darussalam, kota yang menaja keimanan

Allahu Akbar

Dari sebuah kota tidur
tersergam ratusan kubah di dalam
lalu membangunkannya
dari mimpi dan tidur
dalam selimut subuh yang dingin
kau laungkan keagungan-Nya - Allahu Akbar
terbangunlah kota tidur bersama insannya
sujud menyembah untuk Khaliknya.

Dari sebuah kota tidur
bertingkah gendang pailing sebagai jantungnya
terbenam besi-besi waja sebagai kakinya
menjalar jalan-jalan sebagai uratnya
mengalir air sungai sebagai darahnya
terbentuk kubah masjid sebagai kepalanya
terdiri bangunan tinggi sebagai tangannya
bersinar lampu neon sebagai matanya
telefon sebagai mulut dan telinganya
terjagalah kota tidur dengan detak jantungnya
menuju wawasan impian kita –tiada batasnya.
Kota kecil kami – dari sebuah kota tidur
tersergam indah membangun
dari desa ke kota
dari lambaran hidup
petani zaman kerbau menarik bajak hingga kabota
yang minumnya minyak petrol
tetap bernama petani.

Dari laut ke kota
bermula dari zaman bidar dan jumpung
dengan balat dan kilung
kembarai laut
tidak mengenal maut
dan kini *fibre glass* dan enjin sangkut
pukat karat dan pukat tunda
mengharung gelombang laut
mengharung gelombang maut
ia tetap bernama pelaut
nelayan dan ikan asinnya
petani dengan ubi kayunya
selain mereka siapa yang menikmatinya?

Dari kota tidur
kami terjaga dan tdak lagi bermimpi
dari buruh ke mandur
dari nelayan ke petani
dari pengarah ke kerani
dari S.U.T dan pak menteri
dengan ikrar dan rasa taat kami
Daulat Tuanku ...

12 May 1992

kilung – deep-water stake trap or fish corral
balat – deep-water stake trap or fish corral
jumpung – a small canoe-like water craft
bidar – sampan
PULAU CHERMIN
by Yahya M.S

(i)
Di lautnya mahkota tenggelam
Ditembak mulut meriam
Kotanya terbakar berasap hitam
Atas segala rahsia menampung dendam

Di lautnya mahkota tenggelam
Memanggil aku waktu malam
Cintanya merindu di bulam suram
“aku serpihan sejarah yang silam”

Di lautnya mahkota tenggelam
Jika nyanyiannya mati aku bersamanya terbenam
Tinggallah rumah ibu yang malang terbuang
Kerana bapa pergi berjuang

(ii)
Terlalu banyak akan ditatap
Kan disingkirkan daya disentap
Terlalu banyak akan dikenang
Kan dikikis tangis memanjang
Terlalu banyak akan diselesaikan
Kan selesai hari pun hujan

Kala lahit anakku pertama
Kubawakan perahu layar menjenguk neneknya
“Selamlah tonggak sebuah kerajaan”
daalam kuburnya yang tiada juga berpesan
“Aku sudah mati dalam kehausan
Yang datang di sini semacam penderitaan”

Di Pulau Chermin banyak nisan
Sepanjang tahun kita tangiskan
Kotanya terbakar berasap hitam
Atas segala rahsia menampung dendam

(iii)
Di lautnya kerajaan tenggelam padam
Memanggil daku waktu malam
Nyanyiannya merindu di bulan suram
Aku serpihan sejarah yang tenggelam

Terlalu banyak akan ditatap
Kan dikikis hilanglah harap
Terlalu banyak akan diselesaikan
Kan selesai hari pun hujan

Pulau Chermin sepanjang pagi
Batu-batu mencium alun dan pergi
Darah manusia kunampak lagi
Tangisan pohonan nyaring dan ngeri

Pulau Chermin sepanjang malam
Bulan pecah diburu angin dan hitam
Tulang dan runtuhan kuingat dalam sedan
Sumpahan menggetar dan mendendam
Seribu musim sudah lalu
Pulau Chermin makin pilu
Dalam lagu makin menyayu
Memanggil aku anaknya yang piatu

(iv)
Seribu musim mati di lautan
Layar-layar dan perahu mati di pelabuhan
Makin banyak akan dikenangkankan
Dalam kenangan runtuhlah keluhan

Bertiup angin bulan ini
Meminta aku membawa kendi
Kan menadah kan memberi
Dalam ketenangan menghidupkan bahang api
Cemburu aku pada cintaku
Yang malap di pulau kualanya batu-batu

(v)
Terlalu banyak telah ditatap
Membuai rindu dan ratap
Terlalu banyak sudah dikenang
Silau mata dan dada penuh detik-detik terbentang
Sudah banyak diselesaikan
Tapi cintanya memanggil aku sepanjang zaman

Makin memburu hidupku
Dari batu-batu di kuala berkata: terharu
Dengan lagunya waktu bulan, Bulan baru
Belailah aku dalam pangku
Seribu musim sudah mati
Pulau Chermin makin sepi
Darah manusia kunampak lagi
Tangisan kuburan terlalu ngeri

Dengan tangan dan baju tebuka
Manalah anak-anakku hatinya waja?
KAMPUNGKU
by HJR

Kehijauan daun
lambang keunggulan
kewujudan abadi
di muka bumi ini
anugerah Ilahi

Di atas kesuburan itu
lambang kesetiaan kami
mewarnai kehidupan
bakal kekal berlarutan
mealui liku perjalanan
di atas sumpah kesetiaan
pada agama bangsa dan watan

kewujudan kami
bersatu tenaga
satu warna, satu hati
ingin berjasa pada sesama manusia
walau apa turunannya
segalanya indah belaka
mewarnai kehidupan
seperti kehijauan daun
kemerduan siulan burung

Betapapun peritnya
liku perjalanan ini
akan terhapus jua
apabila tangan kita saling menghulur jabat
menyambut kehadiran
kemesraan yang mendatang
tanpa memperhitungkan
soal rugi dan untung
seperti pelaburan saham
di pasaran

Segalanya yang dimiliki
adalah warisan abadi
bergayut di dada kami
membesar bersama waktu
kerana telah ditakdirkan
di sini kami dilahirkan
di sini kami dimatikan
biarlah waktu menentukan
jabat tangan kesetiaan
yang dihulur bersama
menjalin kemesraan
di antara kita
berkampung di sini

Mahligai kemesraan
dibina di sini
bersama ketulusan
hati dan budi
agar antara kita
terus memaut rasa
antara cinta dan kesetiaan
tanpa membuat perkiraan
langkah-langkah perjalanan
kota dan desa

Antara kita
tetap sama di sini
berhuma dan berbakti
walaupun daerah ini
susah didekati
namun dakapan kemesraan
tetap disambut bersama
tetap disambut bersama
kerana daerah ini
adalah diri kita
setia di atas janji
justeru kesetiaan itu
kita bina perkampungan di sini.

20 Ogos 1993
TANGISAN TERJAJAH
by Yura Halim

Tersedar beta dari ingatan
teringat beta nasib tanggungan
miskin terhina rendah penglihatan
jauh terombak rasa kesenangan.

Beta mengeluh ingatkan untung
nasib bangsa untung negara
hidup diperas azab ditanggung
oh sakitnya, wahai ... sengsara.

Nyaring merdu “Hidup Melayu”
sumbang suara hidup merdeka
mengingatkan beta di abad lalu
zaman keesaan negara pusaka.

Kini beta mengerang dik sengsara
getir hidup miskin terduga
diselimuti kehidupan rugi dikira
menahan haus di tepi telaga.

Lelah jemu rasanya jiwa
lelah penat rasanya hidup
menitis air di tasik mata
memerah keringat di rendang redup.

Beta teringat –

21
hidup ertinya perjuangan
kendati jiwa melarat
mesti percaya ada kemenangan.

Beta merasa –
darah beta darah hidup mengalir
biarpun kini diperkuasa
masanya akan tiba bergilir-gilir.

Beta terbayang –
waajah keindahan alam pusaka
biarpun jiwa melayang asalkan bangsa negara merdeka.
TRAKTORMENYONGSONG TANAH
by Tinta Merah

Suri memancar di celah pohon-pohon muda,
lebat dan subur hidupnya
traktormenyongsong tanah
daribukitkelurah
daun-daunhijau menghitam
menyimpan pandemad.

Traktormenyongsong tanah
daribukitkelurah
penghunirimbalarimenyusrenja
malambermuramurda

Traktormenyongsong tanah
daririmbakekota
meninggalkanzaman danatuknenek kita
dengan senyum dan kening di mata.
BERGALAU DI WAJAH SURAM
by K. Manis

Kawan kita sudah berjalan jauh
dalam terang dalam suram
dan sama bergalau di bulan purnama
dan bersedu menyayat di kala kelam.

Bukankah anak pewarisan ini penyambung segala
ada langkah yang salah kian menyala
kurenung ombak tetap mengalun
di mukanya anak dan kawanku bergalau
bertukar senyuman memalis pandang
alangkah garang anak peneroka zaman
lagu dan simfoni pembuka palang.

Kurenung ombak tetap mengalun
di mukanya anak dan kawanku bergalau
di hati lapang seluas lautan
di kepala kosong sesunyi angkasa
maka berkatalah segala bahawa ini kuntum-kuntum dari sejarah
sudah bertakhta di hati yang belum cair
paling menadah dan menyerah.

Kurenung ombak tetap mengalun
di mukanya anak dan kawan bergalau
ia menangis sepanjang zaman
menampar menendang menghalau jangan berenang
kau akan tenggelam di dasar yang paling dalam
dan hidupmu kelam dari sapa dan pintu syurga
o, Tuhan bukankah keluhan padamu sepanjang zaman
lihat anak kian bergalau dalam kesesatan
berlagu dan bertukar senyum memalis pandang
alangkah garang anak peneroka zaman
pembilang bintang?
FOR A SMALL town which had always been serene, it seemed like too much had happened that week.

First, a big factory had just caught fire, causing many people to lose their jobs. Then, on the following day, a number of youngsters and teachers received a huge blow when the examination results were announced in the local paper: No one in that town had passed. And lastly, there was the mysterious death of Mawarti.

“She shouldn’t have died,” complained a skinny man wearing white-rimmed glasses.

“Yeah,” agreed a pudgy man with wavy hair.

“A sweet and pretty girl like her shouldn’t have died.”

“Yeah, there are lots of other girls that should have!”

At the coffee shop, the atmosphere seemed gloomy: everyone appeared emotional, heads were down, people preferred to be left alone and got annoyed when disturbed.

At that moment, Pak Seman, Mawarti’s father, who was then all alone, entered the shop as if nothing had happened; as if there had not been a death in the family recently. He came to get his old kopiah (skull cap) which he had absentmindedly left at the shop.

His head was never without that kopiah. He had bought it especially for his wife’s funeral twenty years ago. Since then, he had become someone who lived very humbly and relatively oblivious to everything else but his chicken farm. He was nicknamed Pak Seman Kopiah. And he was rather fond of that moniker.

As he stepped into the coffee shop, no one greeted him as they normally did. Only a few glanced his way with a curious look more suitable for strangers.

“Where’s my kopiah?” he asked a waiter.

The waiter looked at him questioningly.

“I accidentally left my kopiah here, where is it?”
The waiter eyed him from top to toe a couple of times. Pak Seman felt uneasy. The waiter continued to observe him; staring intently at his head.

“Who are you?”
“Where is my kopiah?”
“Who are you?”
“Don’t make fun of me!”
“I don’t recognise …”
“Don’t make fun of me!” snarled Pak Seman. “I’m an old man!”

The waiter became silent. He was offended.

“Sir,” he uttered. “I don’t ridicule the elderly. I respect them!”

“Well then – where’s my kopiah?”

The waiter stared at him for quite a while, and then called a few other waiters. Clearly, they too knew nothing about the kopiah. And they all denied knowing Pak Seman.

“You seem to know us,” noted one of them. “May I know who you are?”
“You’re all definitely making fun of me!”
“What would you like to drink?”
“Where’s my kopiah?” yelled Pak Seman. “Where?”

The rest of the customers, who were initially only observing from a distance, had started to close in to intervene. Or at least, to find out what the fuss was all about.

Pak Seman pummelled a table in anger.

“Where’s my kopiah? Where?”
“How does it look like, sir?”

“How could you not know,” he said, slamming the table loudly. “You’re all very insolent! Making fun of an old man!”

He furiously pointed at each face. He felt he had the right to be angry at everyone there. He believed his kopiah had been hidden and they wanted to make fun of him. That kopiah had sentimental value to him and he had also used it as a wallet. There was a thousand dollars in it. It was money that he had saved for quite a long time from rearing chickens (which was not selling very well those days – it seemed like
everyone was rearing their own chickens, furthermore his chickens were often stolen by alligators every weekend).

“You’re all very insolent!” shouted Pak Seman. “Where’s my kopiah?”

The shout reduced everyone to silence. They were stunned.

Just then, a long-haired man came forward looking extremely mad.

“You can’t just simply accuse us of being insolent.” The man jabbed Pak Seman on the forehead. “You should at least introduce yourself first, and then point out our bad manners one by one – only then can you accuse us of being insolent!”

He then gave Pak Seman a shove. Pak Seman slumped down into a chair.

“If we really are as insolent as you say,” the man continued, “we’ve certainly never been insolent towards you. There was no opportunity before this as this is the first time we’ve met you. We have never known you before. So you have no right to accuse us of being insolent!”

“I, for example,” said a pudgy fellow, who did not want to be left out from feeling offended, butted in. “I’m not representing anybody – but I am insolent. I like to steal chickens. I steal them every weekend. But was I ever insolent towards you? Clearly no, because I’ve never stolen your chickens. I don’t know where you live or whether you rear chickens or not. So what right do you have to accuse me of being insolent? Only Pak Seman Kopiah can say that, because I always steal his chickens, but you’re not Pak Seman Kopiah – so how can you accuse me of being insolent?”

Pak Seman was baffled, very puzzled and confused. Did they really not recognise him anymore? Or were they pretending not to know him because they had taken his kopiah. He did not dare stand up.

“Truth be told, I have also wronged Pak Seman Kopiah but not you,” confessed a man with droopy eyes. “I was in love with his daughter, Mawarti, and always flirted with her, but now she’s dead. Ah, what’s going to happen to me?”

“Huh, you’re in love with Mawarti too?” the skinny man with white-rimmed glasses glared at him. “I thought I was the only one who flirted with Pak Seman Kopiah’s daughter and stole his chickens. We’re indeed insolent. But this man is not Pak Seman Kopiah therefore, he shouldn’t say we are insolent!”
“I had also often flirted with Mawarti, Pak Seman Kopiah’s daughter,” said the pudgy man with wavy hair. “And I had also taken his chickens without permission. I considered it as borrowing though. I own a number of female chickens and not even one male. Is it right to be keeping only female chickens? My female chickens would grow old and die without laying eggs. That was why I took one of Pak Seman Kopiah’s roosters. Still that can’t be judged as insolence – well, maybe a little. But you’ve accused me of that and you’re not even Pak Seman Kopiah. It’s a good thing I’m a patient person – I’m ready to forgive you.”

Listening to him, people started to simmer down: they were willing to be patient and just forget about the matter. They were inclined to return to their seats. Patience is better and it wasted less time. There were a lot of other things to think about.

Pak Seman grew more perplexed.

Before they could return to their own seats, a bald man appeared. He was, enraged.

“I’m not a patient person!” he bellowed. The muscles in his cheeks tensed. “And I will not forgive you! You’ve accused me of being insolent!” The man took a deep breath and looked at the others. “We have all been accused of being insolent!”

That got everyone riled up again. They had been accused of being insolent – why should they remain patient? Wouldn’t that be cowardice?

“Even if I were threatened,” the man continued. “I would never admit to having stolen Pak Seman Kopiah’s chickens. I’m actually the most insolent one – because it is true, I steal his chickens every weekend, and I harboured feelings for his daughter Mawarti and often flirted with her. But you’re not Pak Seman Kopiah. You’re a stranger here, why did you suddenly accuse us of being insolent?”

The owner of the coffee shop who had been silently watching the drama, did not want to be left out.

“I don’t know if this would qualify as being insolent,” he stated. “I had also stolen Pak Seman Kopiah’s chickens, but I repay him by giving him a special discount whenever he has lunch here and orders chicken meat. He would always thank me for my generosity. If that’s considered insolent, then that means I had only been insolent
towards Pak Seman Kopiah. You’re not him, so you’ve no right accusing me of being so! But it’s alright, I forgive you. I’m a patient person.”

Pak Seman, who was still sitting down, grew even more bewildered.

The fury surging in everyone simmered down again. They were willing to be patient and simply forgive. Why bother get angry? But agitation was again fanned when another man appeared, exasperated and refusing to calm down. When that man withdrew, another emerged saying he was willing to forgive and be patient. Then another would turn up refusing to forgive.

People began to feel irritated and confused.

“One minute you get angry!”

“The next minute, you want to be patient!”

“How is this?”

“Should we be angry towards this old man or not?” asked the bald man, as if he was seeking for a decision in a committee meeting.

“The old man has accused us of being insolent,” grumbled the pudgy man, “The point now isn’t whether to be angry or be patient but to defend ourselves!”

People nodded in agreement.

Pak Seman stared from one face to another – speechless. Very much confused. His forehead wrinkled. Why did they appear as if they were talking about him but not to him? Was he truly unrecognisable without his kopiah? He felt like he was at a strange place, not the small town he knew.

He looked at the pudgy man who was speaking at that time.

“He isn’t Pak Seman Kopiah,” said the pudgy man, pointing to him aggressively. “We must defend ourselves!”

Those who had not defended themselves came forward one by one. Like the ones before them, they too admitted to have been insolent towards Pak Seman Kopiah – they had stolen his chickens and flirted with his daughter, Mawarti.

“We have only been insolent towards Pak Seman Kopiah. And you’re not him – why must you yell at us?”
Pak Seman was dazed, he tried to understand what was happening. His gaze shifted to a young man who had remained quiet all the while. He knew the young man was Mawarti’s sweetheart. He was hoping that he would recognise him.

The young man appeared hesitant. He was the only one who had not gotten involved. All eyes turned to him. The looks he received seemed to be forcing him to defend himself. An uncomfortable silence ensued.

Suddenly someone shouted. “Hey!” “When will you defend yourself huh?”

The young man was then pulled to the front. Red in the face, he opened his mouth to speak.

“Assalamualaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh.” He paused.

No one responded to his greeting.

“I don’t have much experience in life,” he articulated after gathering his thoughts. “So I’ve never done anything insolent. But tonight, I promise, I’ll gather some experience. I’ll steal one or two of Pak Seman Kopiah’s chickens and turn into an insolent person just like everyone else.”

He paused and inhaled, then looked at the people around him. All eyes were still on him. There was complete silence.

“But this old man has accused me of being insolent even when I haven’t done it.”

A thunderous applause erupted.

“That’s right! That’s right!”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Good one!”

The young man grinned. He suddenly felt confident, in front of all those people.

“Thank you,” he said. “Wa billahi taufik wal hi…”

“Shut up!” Pak Seman yelled. “I am the Pak Seman Kopiah whom you’ve all been talking about! Those were my chickens you stole, my Mawarti you all flirted with!”

Everyone burst into laughter.

“You are one crazy old man! How dare you call yourself Pak Seman Kopiah. Where’s the kopiah?” the coffee shop owner snapped.
“I’ve come to look for my kopiah.” Pak Seman let his piercing eyes fall on the
owner’s face. “You’re all pretending you don’t recognise me!”
A man standing next to Pak Seman gave him a shove. He almost fell but quickly
regained his balance. He was then restrained.
The coffee shop owner came and stood before him – staring straight into his
eyes.
“Earlier on,” he spoke gently, almost melodiously, “you accused us of being
insolent, then you claim you’re Pak Seman Kopiah – do you think we don’t know who
Pak Seman Kopiah is?”
“Yeah,” the long-haired man concurred, pouting his lips. “You think you can fool
us?”
“That’s right!” the pudgy man with wavy hair stepped forward, waving his fist
threateningly. “We may be insolent! But we’re not stupid!”
“That’s true!” someone shouted from the back. The young man, Mawarti’s
sweetheart, walked to the front, brimming with self-confidence. “Now he’s calling us
stupid?”
“Seems like it,” the coffee shop owner answered mockingly.
The young man became furious.
Pak Seman was about to say something when a slap landed on his face. He
stumbled. He was pulled up at once and held back again.
“I don’t like being called stupid,” the young man stated. “I may have never passed
an exam but I’m not stupid. The questions were just too difficult. You wouldn’t have
been able to answer them too, old man. If I was really stupid, that’s my business and no
one has the right to call me stupid – except if I allow them and I’ve never allowed
anyone to say I’m stupid!”
The young man wanted to strike him again but the coffee shop owner stopped
him.
It was quiet and tense for a while. Pak Seman was still stunned by the
unexpected hit. His cheeks felt hot.
A man was suddenly trusted to the front.
“I,” he uttered uncertainly, “am also not stupid.”

He was unable to continue. With, his head down and his face turning beet red, he quietly drew back.

“That’s right, he’s not stupid!” Another man clarified. “Just shy, but that’s not his fault. I didn’t pass examinations and I’m not stupid. The questions were so difficult, they confused me.”

“Yes,” said someone from the back in support of him. “Every exam’s like that – we don’t get tested on what we really read up on. But we get tested on what we don’t. How can we pass?”

“Exams are intentionally created for people to fail!” said the skinny man with white-rimmed glasses.

“Exams aren’t important!” yelled Mawarti’s sweetheart. “The important thing is that this old man has accused us all of being stupid, for no rhyme or reason!”

A teacher appeared out of the blue.

“Who said exams are not important?” he retorted. “Have you done any research on this?”

Pak Seman was even more baffled.

“Not yet!” answered the pudgy man with wavy hair. “But you should hold a symposium.”

“Yes.” The skinny man with white-rimmed glasses agreed. “And the symposium should not be held in a coffee shop.”

“What’s wrong with my coffee shop!” the offended owner demanded to know. But no one took heed of him.

“I am willing to kill for what I believe in,” declared a man.

“Yes, why take exams?” another supported from the back.

“We won’t go to heaven sitting for examinations!” uttered the skinny man with white-rimmed glasses.

“Quiet!” roared Pak Seman, pounding a table. He had stood up and had regained his strength as he witnessed them quarrelling amongst themselves. He remembered his
kopiah and the money in it. “You all won’t go to heaven if my kopiah isn’t returned to me!”

There was a hush and everyone looked at him in astonishment.

“Would we only go to heaven because of this kopiah?” asked the long-haired man.

“That’s right!” Pak Seman answered. “You all have turned chaotic like this because of my kopiah.”

Everyone fell quiet. It just dawned upon them that what the old man was saying was true.

“I am Pak Seman Kopiah,” he said again. “This is my identity card.”

The coffee shop owner snatched the identity card from him.

“This is not your identity card,” he said, slipping it into his own pocket. “This is Pak Seman Kopiah’s card!”

“But I am Pak Seman Kopiah!” yelled Pak Seman. “I am!”

“Sir,” the owner said nicely. “I don’t know why you stole Pak Seman Kopiah’s identity card. But it’s alright – we’ll just forget about it and you just go back to where you came from.”

“But I’m Pak Seman Kopiah! I am!”

The skinny man with white-rimmed glasses walked up to him behaving like a learned person.

“Sir,” he said slowly, adjusting his glasses. “Initially, you accused us of being insolent, then stupid, and then said we’re not going to heaven. Thus, we are insolent, stupid and not going to heaven. Who are you really?”

Pak Seman glowered at the young man. Up close, his old, wrinkly eyes looked scary. The young man retreated a few steps.

“We know Pak Seman Kopiah and he’s become a huge part of our lives in this town – we’ve all stolen his chickens at least once and fallen in love with his daughter Mawarti, who wasn’t supposed to die,” the wavy-haired pudgy man explained.
“I myself have stolen five chickens from him so far and he believed it when I said that there were a lot of alligators in this town,” admitted the skinny man with white-rimmed glasses.

“We know Pak Seman Kopiah very well and it’s impossible that we are mistaken. But who are you? We’ve never seen you before. You just appeared out of nowhere, yelling at everyone and claiming to be Pak Seman Kopiah. Oddly enough, you used Pak Seman Kopiah’s identity card to convince us. Only a mad person would believe you. And we’re not mad!”

The skinny man with white-rimmed glasses suddenly quietened down when he saw Pak Seman glare at him. As if to hide his jitters, he lit a cigarette as he looked at all the speechless men around him. He puffed away at the cigarette, like someone in fear of something, his hands shaking.

A head rose from out of the speechless crowd. It was Mawarti’s sweetheart.

“I don’t quite understand – is he now calling us all mad?” he asked.

The skinny man with white-rimmed glasses motioned him to just keep quiet.

“Don’t complicate things. We don’t want to deviate from the main subject,” he warned. “But don’t worry, as long as we don’t acknowledge him as Pak Seman Kopiah, we’re not crazy!”

“It’s pretty interesting when you think about it. Why would you want to be Pak Seman Kopiah, when we all see him as a dim-witted and quiet person who believed his chickens were stolen by alligators? I myself had stolen his chickens and I’m not an alligator,” exclaimed a man who was standing close to Pak Seman Kopiah.

Pak Seman plopped down and started to feel weak. He exhaled deeply. It never occurred to him that he has been thought of as dim-witted all these time. He looked at the man who was speaking. He then dropped his head as if unable to think anymore.

“Are you already bored living as a normal person?” the man continued. “And you want to be Pak Seman Kopiah instead? If you want to disguise yourself as Pak Seman Kopiah – at least wear a worn-out kopiah.”

“I don’t want to be Pak Seman Kopiah,” Pak Seman stated. “I am Pak Seman Kopiah! The only thing is, my kopiah is gone.”
“What’s so important about that old kopiah anyway?”
Everyone laughed and thought it was the most hilarious thing.
“Maybe you’re all pretending not to know me – because you’ve all finished the money that was in my kopiah.”
“What?” the man was startled. “Money?”
“Yes, money! A thousand dollars actually,” explained Pak Seman. They were not laughing anymore. But eyeing one another suspiciously.
Then, all eyes were on the first waiter.
“I didn’t take that kopiah,” he responded in fear.
“Surely you had taken it!” the bald man retorted. “You were the one who started this!”
“Maybe it was you,” the waiter argued. “Where’s that one thousand dollars?”
The bald man was suddenly quiet. All eyes were on him. Terrified, he took a step back.
“Maybe you all took it,” he said pointing randomly. “Stop accusing me!”
People encircled him in unison as he was the first one to make the accusation as if he feared he would be blamed. They closed in on him. Suddenly, a blow landed on his face. He collapsed. Everyone frantically searched him for the one thousand dollars. When they could not find the money, they switched target.
“Where is the money?”
“Where?”
“Help!”
Pandemonium ensued with shouts and the sound of fallen tables and chairs and broken cups
Pak Seman just sat, watching the mayhem.
Things calmed down when an old man, about Pak Seman’s age, entered and sat at Pak Seman’s usual table. He was wearing an old kopiah. With a foolish expression on his face, as if nothing was happening around him, he ordered black coffee. Then he sat quietly, counting the stack of dollar notes, which he had pulled out of his old kopiah. He then smiled to himself.
Everyone went back to their seats, with heads bowed and expressionless faces, as if wanting to put the recent madness behind them.

There was silence.

The coffee shop owner straightened his scruffy clothes. He handed Pak Seman’s identity card to the old man.

“This town has a lot of alligators,” said the old man, flashing a silly smile. He turned quiet again.

“What would you like to eat?” asked the owner kindly. “The usual – chicken?”

The old man nodded.

Pak Seman couldn’t believe his eyes. He suddenly jumped up and throttled the old man. But he was pulled away quickly. He was dragged, lifted and thrown out screaming.

“Hmph!” snapped the owner. “This isn’t the place to strangle people for no apparent reason!”

Outside, Pak Seman lay abandoned. He saw the young man, Mawarti’s sweetheart, chatting warmly with the old man. He began to feel weak. Perhaps he wasn’t Pak Seman Kopiah after all and that old man was the real Pak Seman Kopiah.

He stroked his kopiah-less head.

“Damn!” he roared. “If I’m not me - who am I?”

He rubbed his head unceasingly. His hair became more tangled.

*Translated by Nornazrahwati binti Haji Abd Rahman*
THE OILFIELD LABOURERS

Kampong Umbi was on fire. Forty houses were burnt down.

Finally everything came under control. The fire trucks and the rescue team had left. Only a number of distraught old mothers remained, weeping and wishing they were dead. An old man, who had been critically ill, had also been found burnt to death in his home. Two conflagrations of fire were seen about a hundred and forty-two yards from the burnt houses.

At nightfall the area became still. The heat from the fire could still be felt and it made the stomach churned. Yazid saw puffs of tiny smoke dancing in the haze. He trembled. He visualised houses being destroyed; nothing was left untouched by the flames. He raised his face and stared far ahead and saw sparks of fire flickering as if they were suspended in the darkness of the night. Then he caught a glimpse of his own shadow in the mist but it was slowly disintegrating. It was no longer his shadow. So whose was it? The shadow doubled, and at times appeared to be swaying left and right.

“Are you searching for the stumps of your house Yazid?” Adam asked.

“I am searching for the stumps of all houses,” he replied.

Covered with coal dust his naked feet had turned black. He wanted to feel the heat from the fire that had razed his village to the ground. He wanted his skin to be burned by that same fire that had destroyed his village. He was cursing the fate of his village but he was full of praise for the happiness and peace that he had experienced living there.

“Maybe you should just leave this place,” Adam suggested. “Find a new place to build your home.”

Their shadows moved. Rings of fire far and near were blown by the wind. It was a moonless night, with thick clouds covering the sky.

“How was the old man?” Yazid asked.

“Dead.”

“When will he be buried?”

“Tomorrow.”
“We should help dig his grave.”
“Sure,” Adam replied.
“At the very least I have the right to put out the fire that had destroyed my house.”
“Where are you sleeping tonight?” Adam asked.
“I don’t know.”
“You can stay at my place.”
“Anywhere will do.”
“Let’s go home. You need to take a shower and remove all those worries.”

In the bedroom, he laid sprawled on his front, with his face pushed under the pillow. Outside, he could hear Adam telling a friend about the fire. Another story unfolded and they laughed hysterically. Their voices echoed through the silence of the night. Yazid covered one ear, then the other. In his imagination, he saw fire smouldering wildly outside, burning every grass and twig on the beach and rising to the treetop. The large sparks of fire on the Casuarina tree danced in the rhythm of the wind blowing from the South China Sea. The old man would be buried on that beach the next day. He remembered the old man very well. He was a cock fighter with a peculiar style when facing a new contender. His movements were agile and his stamina seemed to increase the minute he entered the ring. His preoccupation with cock fighting took away all thoughts of death. He was only upset when his gamecock fluttered in defeat. The vision and memory of the fire were slowly disappearing from his mind. What he saw then was the dead body of the old man, being washed. And in the distance he could see little flames floating on the South China Sea, the tall derrick and, from its top, a falling object. His heart stopped when the object hit the ground. The vibration caused by a passing truck lulled him to sleep. That night he dreamt of fighting the fire that had engulfed five villages.

He was out early the following day in the mist of the morning dew. He headed straight for the graveyard. Walking on sand and pebbles, he walked across the wet grass and then turned right to avoid them. He crossed the bridge and looked down. The water was black due to the oil spill. In between puddles of oil, he saw his own reflection, his head white, covered with dew.
Far across the sea, the sun was shining radiantly while the lights slowly dimmed. He passed through an alley. He observed the wreckage. There were traces of rain from the day before, which had snuffed out the fire and smoke. Bits of white dusts could be seen among the black columns which still stood erect. Amidst the haze, black stumps could be seen still rooted to the earth. His steps were slow but he was no longer looking around. He saw some men arriving with their hoes and scoops. The sandy soil made it easy for them to dig.

He continued walking slowly and directed his gaze straight ahead. At times his eyes glimpsed at the pebbles he was about to step on. And he was very careful with his steps. Climbing with a pair of wet shoes could be disastrous. He could see another derrick at the end of the road. A new oilfield had been discovered there. He felt tired. He could feel the cool sea breeze on his body. He had been troubled since morning. And that feeling got worse when all eyes fell on him. Their stares were taunting. Having nothing to say, he proceeded to climb the derrick. When his friends, who were on top looked down, the glaring sunlight that was reflected from their metal helmets hurt his eyes.

“You look very high-spirited today, Yazid!” exclaimed Jamal from the top. The glaring light that bounced of Yazid’s helmet hit his eyes. Jamal quickly shifted his glance to the greenery nearby.

Ignoring them, he climbed up further to where they were. Now his vision was dazzled by the light from the sea and by the whiteness of the foams on the sand. He could no longer hear the splashing waves hitting the beach. He looked up. Jamal, Ghani and Ibrahim were observing him. “Stop right there!” shouted Ghani, as he flung a coil of wire to Jamal. Yazid secured his safety buckle and wiped off his sweat, the shadow of the derrick’s poles emblazoned across his chest.

Yazid looked at his friends. Their faces were dark red. He could even see beads of perspiration on the wrinkles beneath their helmets. “Catch,” said Jamal.

Yazid grabbed the wire. A black bag of tools was hung onto the baluster before him. He tied the bag with the wire. Jamal pulled the wire slowly. That morning, the
workers were only preparing the equipment which would be assembled later in the evening.

They climbed down at almost eleven. The sky was cloudy by then. The labourers rested, enveloped by thin shadows, their bodies wet, from the sea vapour.

“Jamal,” asked Yazid, “did you see the condition of the old man when he was dying last night?”

“Yes. Why? I even carried him.”

“How was he?”

“His clothes were completely burnt. His skin, crinkled and black. His flesh was red and moist. He was screaming hysterically.”

“Do many people die that way?”

“Not many.” Jamal was only forty-nine years old. “Because such terrible fires seldom occur.”

“Easy, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Death without having to suffer long illness.”

“Perhaps his pain was far greater than that suffered by those having a normal illness,” Jamal suggested.

“Was he unconscious yesterday?”

“He lost consciousness after screaming hysterically. After that he died.”

“Did he recall what he was leaving behind?” asked Yazid.

“What did he leave behind?” Jamal asked.

“Whatever that he might have left behind.”

“I doubt. All his belongings were destroyed, all his chickens died.”

“Do you want to die that way?”

“Me! Me? Oh please dear God, give me a more peaceful death.”

“Peaceful? How?”

“From a mild illness perhaps.”

“But people rarely die from a mild illness.”

“A more or less fatal illness,” Jamal replied.
He stared at the sea, then at the sparks of fire. In daily life he hesitates to commend bravery but he has always believed in diligence and hard work. He then looked up at the white clouds until his eyes hurt.

“Dad was not ill when he died. He committed suicide by taking poison,” Yazid revealed.

“Everyone dies differently.”
“You are a weird person.”
“Everyone has the right to choose on how he wants to die.”
“Why do you want to talk about death?”
“Because death is necessary,” Yazid replied, “to sever something.”

He avoided looking at Jamal’s face. His friend looked older than him. There were tender moments during their friendship when Yazid was comfortable regarding him as a father. The veins on Jamal’s forehead would protrude when he spoke loudly or whenever he opened his mouth wide. Yazid shifted his eyes to look at the sky, then to the top of the derrick and to its base. The derrick’s shadow zigzagged on the patches of dried, yellowish grass and stretched out before them.

They had finished their lunch. Yazid looked at the horizon that split the sea and the sky. In his heart, he still could not understand why Jamal was so scared to face death.

“Do you know Yazid?” Yazid was startled and turned his body towards Jamal.
“Know what?”
“How much longer do you think we will be working here, as derrick climbers?”
“As long as there is oil.”
“Do you know that there are already signs of it depleting?”
“I do,” Yazid answered. He had long known that.
“Once this derrick is ready, we will have to erect another one,” said Jamal.
“Who said so?”
“William.”
“Where?”
“Offshore, at *aluh tiga*’ Jamal replied. This particular labourer was always quick to know about the company’s plans and strategies. He had very acute senses.

“It seems that we have more oil now.”

“How do you know?” Yazid asked.

“There, we are building a new derrick offshore.”

“Done with onshore drilling, now they are exploring offshore,” Yazid commented.

“It is amazing that oil can also be extracted from the sea.”

“Oil originated from the sea millions of years ago.”

“We are so blessed.”

“The oil in Seria is almost depleted. Just be prepared.”

The oilfield labourers began climbing the derrick. The higher they went the slower they got. Gradually the labourers appeared smaller and blacker. From above, all Yazid could see were black and grey roofs among the white tanks. His eyes hurt from the piercing glare of the sun. The black river flowed to the sea. Oil pipelines crawled overlapping each other everywhere.

Noise could be heard from the derrick base. William stood with arms akimbo. Through a pair of dark glasses he watched the noisy labourers. Amidst the noise, something crashed into the balusters. A body lay sprawled across the metal rods. The labourers were frantic. They almost could not recognise their friend’s face. His brain was shattered into pieces. Minutes later his eyes shut and he turned stiff.

*Translated by Siti Badriyah biti Haji Md Yusuf*

*Editor: Hajah Sharifah Khadijah Husien Alkaff*
THE LAND

The huge clock in the living room strikes six times. As she stands observing the road outside from the kitchen window, Aiza could hear the chimes very clearly despite the din from her three children. There are only three of them – all girls, but they are really noisy. Outside, dusk is beginning to fall. Soon, the sky will be painted red and the call to prayer will resonate from radios and televisions. Every year in December, in the land of Darussalam, which is located near the equator, sunset is earlier and the nights are longer.

Aiza has been home from work since five that afternoon Banun, her helper, has already gone home. After performing the ‘Asr prayer, Aiza has taken over Banun’s routine. She has showered her three girls. Even though Nadia is already six and knows how to take care of herself, she still wants to be pampered at times. And Aiza would still entertain her eldest daughter’s needs no matter how tired she is. Farah and Juju are clamouring for attention too. Of late, Aiza can feel the pressure. She no longer has time for her flower garden, no time to attend the French classes conducted twice a week at the house of a Eurasian friend, let alone the body conditioning classes organised by another. Ever since Khaliz has become busy with his work outside the home, her time has been fully devoted to her children.

In a moderate-sized kitchen equipped with fine and modern utensils, Aiza is trying to prepare supper yet she could not stop herself from peering out the window. While frying some mackerel she looks outside and becomes worried when she does not see what she hopes to see. It is almost time for Maghrib but still no sign of him. He had promised on the phone that he would return before six. Aiza grumbles under her breath. For the umpteenth time she scrutinises the cars travelling down the road that faces the back of their kitchen. Still, no white Datsun 240K GT in sight turning into the direction of their rented house.

Aiza would not have been worried if Khaliz returns home late once in a while or if he misses his prayers once in a while. Why should she worry if the situation warrants it and if it is unintentional? Aiza believes she is a very tolerant person who forgives easily.
But she feels that Khaliz has really crossed the line today. Way too much. She cannot remember how many times Khaliz has broken his promise to be home early. As a woman, there are times when she has doubts--is he really busy with the land deals or with some other matter?

But whenever Khaliz arrives home with large rolls of maps, all her doubts will vanish. Aiza would be sorry and would feel reassure that Khaliz is indeed trying really hard to provide their family with a better future. She has understood that fact well. But should she just allow Khaliz to shirk his present responsibility in order to secure their future? His responsibility towards God, towards herself and their children, who need him to be present every afternoon and on weekends. Their daughters have been complaining lately about how long it has been since they last went picnicking and strolling as a family.

"It has been more than a month." Even Farah, who is only five, knows how to count. This only aggravates Aiza’s anxiety.

Aiza suddenly recalls the phone call she received earlier from her father-in-law when she entered the house upon returning from work. She had promised to convey his message to Khaliz.

“If you can, do come tomorrow,” the old man requested. Aiza recalls that he had made the same request last week. What a pity. Khaliz is not even bothered. Last week Khaliz was again busy meeting a landlord. To date, however, none of his efforts have proved fruitful.

Aiza tries to imagine how Khaliz will react when he receives the message later. Although Khaliz appears to be a rather quiet and gentle person, there are times when he can be headstrong. He will surely give an excuse, saying that he is busy. There are too many office and non-office matters that he needs to attend to. But Aiza is planning to give him a long lecture tonight. There are so many things that she has kept in her heart, things that she has been wanting to get off her chest for a very long time.

“Mama, I want to watch Malaysian channel but Farah wants to watch Brunei’s instead.” Suddenly Nadia is standing at the door that separates the dining room from
the kitchen. Farah and Juju are tailing behind her. Farah with a pleading look, seeking to be defended. The sixteen-month-old Juju looks at her sisters in bewilderment. “Juju, which channel do you want to watch, sweetheart?” Aiza asks her youngest. Clueless, Juju shakes her hairless head. Juju has a rather boyish face - friends and relatives have often commented that she looks very much like her father. Aiza recalls how she had prayed hard for a boy while she was pregnant with Juju. Khaliz and she really wanted a boy after having two daughters, Farah and Nadia. But God has not granted them what they wish for yet. So Juju was born, another girl but with boyish traits. Juju has since become their darling, just like Nadia and Farah. “Wow, I have three ladies now. You will all surely blossom into beauties” Khaliz often tells their daughters. “And do choose a partner with lots of land, yes?” Aiza would tease. Khaliz would glance sharply at his wife. “Yes, not like your mama. She married someone who has no land, not even a scrap,” he said sulkily. Immediately a pinch would land on his lap. Khaliz would pretend to shriek in pain and their daughters would giggle hysterically. Even Juju would laugh along. This evening, Juju looks even more adorable in her yellow baju kurung. “It will be much easier if only Juju can tell us which channel she prefers. We can then cast our vote,” says Aiza to her other two daughters. Failing to understand their mother’s words or what justice is, both Nadia and Farah continue to look at Aiza’s face beseechingly. “What is playing on the Malaysian channel?” Aiza asks. “Cartoon,” Nadia answers quickly. “And on the Brunei channel?” “Also cartoon,” Farah replies. “But isn’t it almost prayer time?” “I want to watch azan too. Then there will be nasyeed,” Farah continues. Farah is very articulate for her age. She can also read as fluently as Nadia. Aiza bites her lip. In most matters, as the eldest, and at Aiza’s command, Nadia has always had to give in. And now Nadia has started to question why she has to forego her
wishes for Farah’s. “Don’t you love me? You love Farah more.” She often says --a remark that pleases her grouchy sister who will have a smile of victory etched across her smooth, round face. At times it occurs to Aiza that Farah only opposes her sister in order to hurt her. Just like that evening. Farah is not that keen actually but because her sister wants to watch cartoon on the Malaysian channel, she is insisting on watching one on the Brunei channel. “We’ll watch Brunei channel alright, mama,” Farah pleads.

“But I have the right to the television too,” Nadia blurts out. Aiza wonders where Nadia has learned to use the word ‘right’ from. From school perhaps.

“I have the right too.” echoes Farah, even though she may not have understood the meaning of the word she has just uttered. Aiza has no answer.

“Rights! Both of you are so like your father. Always thinking about rights!” But the words are spoken only in Aiza’s heart. They would not have understood even if she had voiced them out.

“We’ll do it this way. We switch off the television for now. It’s almost time for the Maghrib prayer. We can watch it again after the prayer ok?” Aiza tries to be fair.

“But the cartoon will be over by then, Ma,” sulks Nadia, pouting her little red lips. Nadia is indeed prettier than both Farah and Juju. Even in moments of anger, she still looks sweet.

“Which one is more important prayer or watching television?” Aiza asks.

“Prayer,” Farah exclaims. Nadia and Farah have been attending religious lessons. Although they are still learning the basics, they have already comprehended the importance of the second pillar of Islam.

“Ayer, ayer!” Juju breaks her silence by bending her plump body as she imitates the bending position in prayer.

Nadia, who was moody earlier, bursts into laughter. Farah runs towards the television to switch it off. She then switches on the little radio on the bookshelf. Soon, the call to prayer fills every corner of the house, which has enormous rooms.

“I will ask father to buy me a small television,” Nadia says to herself.

“Me too,” says Farah, not wanting to lose out.
Aiza recalls that the girls have always asked for a small television for their rooms but she has never complied with their demands. Khaliz, on the other hand, pampers the children by gladly fulfilling their wishes, without thinking of the possible risks, even if he has to be in debt.

Suddenly the kitchen door swings open. The person who has been on her mind is now standing at the door. He looks worn out, his wavy hair in a mess from having been blown in the evening breeze. His light green shirt is wrinkled, and unbuttoned at the neck, his dark green tie hanging on the executive briefcase. Aiza recalls that it was her gift to him when he was promoted to senior officer a year ago.

“Dad’s home, dad’s home.” The children are delighted that their father is home. Little Juju approaches Khaliz and tugs at his trousers. Khaliz picks her up in his arms and kisses her. Still cradling Juju, who is grinning widely, he bends down to kiss Nadia and Farah.

“How about mama?” teases Farah.

“Oh yes, I almost forget. This is my eldest girl.” Khaliz approaches Aiza and kisses his wife’s cheek. Aiza pulls a face in front of Nadia and Farah. “You promised to be back before six,” Aiza reminds him, keeping her voice low so that the girls will not hear.

“I’m really sorry, love. It has taken longer than I had expected,” Khaliz answers.

“It was intentional,” Aiza argues, as she walks towards their room with Khaliz and his little subjects tailing closely behind.

They pray together with their daughters standing behind them, imitating their actions. Now and then Juju will run towards the qiblah but she is swiftly checked by Nadia.

During supper, Aiza remains silent as she feeds Juju quickly. Being an active child, Juju prefers to eat on her own. After a few spoonfuls, she does not want her mother to feed her anymore. She grabs the tiny bowl of porridge and topples it over her face. The sticky rice porridge smears her entire face, making it look really messy. Nadia and Farah giggle in amusement. Khaliz laughs too. Only Aiza is not amused. Juju's
playfulness has added to her burden. She has to clean Juju and change her clothes again.

“Leave it Za. I can clean her up later,” Khaliz says when he sees his wife lifting Juju from her seat and carrying her to the sink to wash her face. Juju cries and kicks as she still wants to play. A slap lands on Juju’s diapered bottom and her whining grows louder.

Khaliz blinks in dismay as he watches his wife’s face sours up. “Finish your food, kids. Then I’ll put you all to sleep,” he says aloud. His comments are directed more at his wife, as he tries to cool her down.

“Tv please, dad?” begs Nadia.

“You can’t. You must sleep early. Children should not stay up late.” Khaliz tries to instill some discipline in their children.

“But it’s a holiday tomorrow, dad,” insists Nadia. Farah is still facing her plate. A while ago she has taken a slice of fried mackerel from Nadia’s plate without her sister’s notice. Farah smiles to herself. Aiza proceeds to the room to change Juju, who has now quieted down. “Where is my fish?” says Nadia, who has just realized that her fish is missing. She glares at Farah, who looks nonchalant.

“Farah, you took it, didn’t you?” Nadia's voice is fierce.

“Of course not,” Farah denies quickly.

“Enough. Enough. Here, have another fish. Eat quickly,” Khaliz orders. Nadia continues eating while, at the same time rolling her eyes at Farah. Farah smiles a little and seems quite happy.

Done with Juju, Aiza goes back to the table to finish her food. Everyone else has finished eating. Khaliz takes their daughters to their bedroom.

After a while Khaliz returns and sits facing his wife.

“Don’t you want to hear about the land that I went to see this afternoon?” he asks, trying to start a conversation.

Aiza takes a sip of water from her glass and says nothing.
“The land’s good, Za. The location is really beautiful - facing the sea and close to the main road. Almost two acres. Only thing is, the price is a headache.” Khaliz deliberately tries to create a little suspense. Aiza just looks at him without saying a word.

“It costs one hundred and twenty thousand dollars,” says Khaliz. Aiza chokes and coughs.

“Why, Za? Have some water.” Panicking, Khaliz quickly stands up and rubs his wife’s back.

“I’m sorry if I’ve shocked you with the price.” Aiza does not reply. She wipes her wet eyes with her sleeve.

“I’ll get you some tissue alright?”

“It’s okay,” she finally manages to say.

Khaliz helps his wife to clean up the kitchen. It is not a habit with him, especially lately. Most of his time is now devoted to studying land maps instead of playing with his daughters. Khaliz is doing a lot of things to please Aiza tonight. Maybe he feels his wife’s frustration. All this while, Aiza has never pulled a long face when he returns late. Maybe Aiza has lost her patience. She can no longer stand being left alone with the children every evening and on weekends.

“I will meet the landlord tomorrow and ask if he can give us a discount. Then I will go and see Jumat. He has a way of getting land without a bank loan,” Khaliz explains while helping Aiza dry the plates.

“Tomorrow?” says Aiza as she looks at Khaliz. Understanding his wife’s look Khaliz quickly tries to comfort her. “Yes. I hope the negotiation will not take long. We can take the children out later in the afternoon. Farah has asked me.”

“But your father wants us to go to town tomorrow. Your grandfather’s condition is getting worse,” says Aiza as she conveys her father-in-law’s message to him. Khaliz becomes silent. He is always reduced to silence each time the topic is brought up.

“Poor father. He has asked you so many times but you do not seem to care.”
“But the land matter is important, Za. I’m afraid I’ll miss the opportunity if I don’t go tomorrow. It’ll be a waste, Za. We’ll be at peace if we can get it. As it is now, we don’t even have a scrap of land that we can call our own.”

“So you’re saying that your terminally-ill grandfather is not important?” Khaliz is silent again.

“I know this is just an excuse. I know you are still holding a grudge over the past,” Aiza postulates.

Khaliz maintains his silence. They have come to their last plate. Khaliz dries his hands with the kitchen towel and proceeds to their bedroom. The television has been switched off since Maghrib prayer time.

Aiza trails behind her husband to their bedroom. Their conversation, which has ended abruptly, is still unfinished. She has to persuade Khaliz that night. Khaliz is sitting on their bed when she enters the room. He is staring at a piece of paper that has drawings on it.

“Is that the land that you’ve been telling me about?” Aiza asks as she sits next to him. She knows that she has to be as diplomatic as she can.

“Hm… see this. This is the main road leading to the Sungai Liang junction and two miles from this junction is where the land is located,” explains Khaliz, with renewed interest as he enthusiastically shows the map to his wife.

“But where can we get that much money from?” Aiza tries to get Khaliz to focus on the important question.

“That’s what I want to discuss tomorrow. Jumat has plans. According to him, if the landlord agrees, we can pay him about fifteen thousand dollars. Then I can pay the balance six months later.”

“And you can save a hundred thousand dollars in six months? We have not been able to save even fifty thousand dollars in a year, dear,” Aiza reminds her husband, whom she thinks is being too ambitious.

“No, that’s not it. Listen to me. During those six months I will divide the land into eight parts. I will sell four parts at thirty thousand dollars each. I can easily get one hundred and twenty thousand dollars and four free pieces of land. Our children will have
their own plots. Don’t you think that’s a brilliant idea?” Khaliz is hoping for some compliments from Aiza.

“It makes sense but how about the possible setbacks? Firstly, what if the landlord doesn’t want to be paid in installments? And even if he agrees, what if there are no buyers for the lots you plan to sell?”

“It is the first matter that I need to discuss tomorrow. You don’t have to worry about the second one as I’m sure there will be buyers. How can the land not sell when people like us, have spent two to three years searching for the ideal land? This land is of great potential,” Khaliz is determined to convince his wife.

Suddenly the phone on the side table rings. Khaliz quickly picks up the receiver. “Hello, yes.” Aiza watches her husband from where she sits and notices a frown forming on his face. It must be some unpleasant news. She detects disappointment in her husband’s voice as he places down the receiver.

“Is everything alright, dear?”

“The land that I was telling you about…”

“What’s the matter?” asks Aiza quickly.

“The owner has changed his mind about selling it.” Khaliz is upset.

“What happened?”

“I have no idea. He said he needs that land. The government is reclaiming the TOL land where he is staying now.” Khaliz looks really disappointed. “I wonder when we can have our own land, Za. We have been working for six years. We’ve hunted everywhere for a suitable piece of land but we still haven’t found any. The well-located ones are either too pricey or taken up by someone else. The cheaper ones are no good with either groves or swams, which will be costly to fix,” Khaliz complains. Aiza has often heard the same complaint but of late, it has somewhat subsided with the numerous offers of land for purchase at reasonable prices coming in.

Ever since they moved to the Belait district, Khaliz has tried to purchase land many times. But luck has not been on their side, these plots of land were often bought by other buyers at prices which were higher than what Khaliz was offering. Khaliz did
not blame the landowner. Who would reject a higher price? Never mind the promises made. In this challenging times, self-interest has priority over the interests of others, whose frustrations and disappointments may perhaps make one feel guilty, but just for a night or so.

“It is alright, dear. It is not meant to be ours. If it is, you don’t have to strive for it, it will fall on your lap. Anyway, you are just too picky. You want a good land, a good location and much more. We would have owned one if you hadn’t been so picky,” Aiza laments.

“If we can’t quickly build a house on the land then what’s the point of buying one, Za? I want to have a land that already has a title deed so that we can build our own house using our housing loan. So while we are staying here, our new house can be rented out.” Khaliz is again sharing his dream, which is all too familiar to Aiza.

“I am very concerned about our three daughters. I must provide them one lot each at least.”

“They are all girls, dear. It is alright if they don’t have any land. It will be their husbands’ responsibility, once they get married. Just like me now. Of course it is different for boys, but we don’t have a son,” says Aiza, offering her opinion.

“You are thinking like my mother. I thought an educated person like you won’t think that way. We are still responsible for them, even though they are girls. What if they don’t get married?”

“I am only trying to make you feel better. I don’t want you to blame yourself should you fail to get any land for our children later.”

“I don’t want them to suffer in the future. Maybe by the time they are all grown up land may be scarce, even if one has enough money to buy. I don’t want them to blame me later.”

“Just like how you’re blaming your father?” Khaliz gives his wife a sharp look.

“Father isn’t at fault. He was young and didn’t know anything then.”

“But the way you are treating him seems to suggest that you do blame him.”

“What do you mean, Za?”
“He has called us so many times, I don’t even know where he is calling from but wherever it was, I’m sure it had been difficult for him to get there.”

Silence.

“We haven’t visited him for two months now, ever since you started hunting for land in Lumut, which we still have yet to get. I fear we are paying for our infidelity as there seems to be no blessing in all our efforts.”

Khaliz remains quiet.

“I know he isn’t your real grandfather. He’s only your father’s uncle but there is still a blood tie dear so you should visit him, especially in his moment of illness. Father said grandfather Haji Jihan really wants to see you. You haven’t visited him ever since we returned from England with Nadia, who was only two months old then. Maybe he wants to see you because you have become someone important now. You know that you’re the most successful in your family, the only one who has studied in the United Kingdom and returned with a degree."

“Yes, I returned with a degree. I have a good salary, a university graduate wife who is also working, but I don’t even have one TOL land. Whereas he and his entire family have acres and acres of land,” retorts Khaliz bitterly.

“But God is fair, dear.”

Khaliz continues, “They have what belongs to me. It may be only four acres but it means a lot to me. If we have it right now, surely I won’t have to run here and there in search of land. Four acres is more than enough for us and our children, Za. Ah, thinking about all that gives me nothing but pain and misery.”

Aiza feels the pain too, thinking about it. Of course if her husband gets the four acres, she will own it too. Each time they pass by Jalan Kebangsaan in Berakas, her heart would race when she sees the beautiful houses standing majestically on the land near the road. That land now belongs to a rich Chinese businessman. He bought the prime land at forty thousand dollars an acre about two years ago. The market value now is one hundred and thirty thousand dollars per acre. If only that land had been returned to Khaliz’s father, Khaliz, as the sole heir, would have acquired everything. They could have developed houses for rental just from the sale of an acre of the land.
Sometime back, when Khaliz related the actual story about the land to Aiza, she too could not contain her anger towards the old man, who had betrayed his own nephew. Aiza pitied Khaliz’s father, who was left by his father when he was ten. The four acres of land had been entrusted by Khaliz’s grandfather to his brother, Haji Jihan, to be handed over to Khaliz’s father when he had reached the eligible age. But when the time came and Khaliz’s father claimed his rights, Haji Jihan had denied him. Being a patient man, Khaliz’s father later requested that the land be sold to him at a reasonable price. With his salary as a manual labourer, he promised to pay for the land in installments. But his proposal was not even considered by Haji Jihan and his hopes of obtaining the land were shattered. But God is Most Compassionate. Khaliz’s father obtained two acres of land from a government incentive offered to residents of Kampong Ayer to encourage them to move inland. Since most of them were reluctant to move out of Kampong Ayer, the government later offered the land to the public. It was on these two acres of land that Khaliz’s father toiled. He planted coconut trees and other fruit trees like durian, tarap, langsat, rambutan and many more. Twenty years later, his efforts paid off. During fruit season, many would visit his orchard, bringing in hundreds of dollars for him. On top of that, he would spend his leisure time growing vegetables on the same two acres of land and selling them at the market. Usually all the fresh vegetables would be snapped up by the neighbours in his village.

Khaliz never had high hopes for the two-acre land, although he knows that the land would automatically be his once his father passes away. To Khaliz, the untitled land cannot be developed. Khaliz has always wanted to build rental houses on that land, but no bank would want to finance a house without any collateral. To obtain a loan from the government without a title deed is also not possible. The villagers once inquired about the status of the land. Whether there was a possibility that the land would one day be granted title deeds. But their questions were never clearly answered. What was worse, the land office had informed them that the area was not even in their record!
It was after that that Khaliz began his land hunting mission. He was dumfounded by the high prices. Although both their salaries amount to nearly six thousand dollars a month, they still feel that they cannot afford to buy a land at such ridiculous prices.

Aiza recalls that they have been working for six years. If they have been saving regularly, they would have accumulated thousands by now. But this is not the case. Sometimes Aiza wonders where all the money goes to. She knows that both of them have commitments to their own parents. Aiza, for instance, has thirteen siblings with nine of them still under her parents' care. More than a quarter of her salary goes to them every month. And Khaliz is too generous towards his relatives and friends. He gives at least fifty dollars during each family festival.

Aiza was once a spendthrift too. She will not deny that. It’s natural when you have cash to spend. She never had the chance to get what she wanted during her childhood and school days. After earning a huge salary, Aiza did not want to hold back. She often went to Singapore for a massive shopping spree. Expensive dresses and silk clothes, genuine leather handbags costing up to a thousand dollars each, branded Bally and Gucci shoes that cost hundreds of dollars plus diamond jewelry and precious gemstones. Indeed Aiza is steep in luxury, but a land she does not possess.

After Juju arrived, Aiza stopped chasing material happiness. She realized that she now has three children to raise and their future to think about. She cannot be selfish anymore.

Aiza recalls that Nadia was only two months’ old when she and Khaliz returned to Brunei after completing their studies. Khaliz has always wanted to start a family early. They got married in their second year of studies. They had a simple wedding, as students, they were not cash-strapped and their parents were not wealthy either. So long as the marriage was valid in God’s eyes, it was enough for them. When Aiza compared themselves to their western friends, she realized how different their way of thinking was. Khaliz and Aiza had wanted to quickly raise a family even though both had not secured a job yet while their western counterparts preferred to achieve their ambitions first and to have a stable career before even settling down, let alone have children!
Now there are times when Aiza feels quite lost. Whenever Khaliz returns with news that someone has already bought this land, or that land is too expensive, she cannot help but feel disappointed. She will then recall the four-acre land that faces Jalan Kebangsaan and her heart will start to pound. But there is no more anger in her, Aiza has learnt a lot from her patient and quiet father-in-law. If there is someone who should be hurt and revengeful, it should have been the old man, as the four-acre land is more his than Khaliz’s. But he has never shown any resentment. He will still attend every festivity and family gathering at Haji Jihan’s house as if nothing has happened. But with Khaliz, his son, the dispute prolongs.

“Let it go, dear. Please stop thinking about that four-acre land. It will never be ours. You should learn from your father. He does not think about it anymore,” Aiza tries to comfort her husband.

“How do you know father’s not thinking about the land, Za? Can you read his mind? He’s just too patient.”

“Isn’t that the best thing to do? What else can he do? Take it to court? Where is the black and white to be used as evidence?”

Khaliz has no answer.

“Let’s just go there tomorrow. Sometimes you should try to conceal that bad attitude of yours. After all you are free tomorrow, since that land deal is off.” Aiza encourages him.

“What does he want to see me for?” Khaliz asks his wife.

“Aren’t you still his flesh and blood? Maybe he feels guilty towards you. Maybe he wants to recompense for your loss with his own property. He still has plenty of land, doesn’t he?” suggests Aiza.

“You mean he’s giving me back my rights?” Khaliz laughs sarcastically.

“That’s it, Za. I’m going to bed. Tomorrow I’ll look around again if there is any land for sale with suitable price and location,” says Khaliz as he switches off his night lamp.
“You know, the kids and I have grown tired of waiting for you every afternoon and weekends. I’m not staying home tomorrow. I’m taking the girls out,” says Aiza sulkily, as she lies down next to Khaliz.

“Where are you going?” Khaliz quickly asks but Aiza does not reply.

Aiza is up early the next morning. After preparing breakfast she gets the girls ready. They are very happy to hear that they are going to Bandar Seri Begawan. Khaliz, who is awakened by all the noise, is still lying in bed, observing his wife. Aiza does not say a word.

“Where are you going this early?” he finally asks.

“To the town. I want to take the girls to visit their grandfather whom they have never met,” she answers dourly.

“Do you really want to drive that far?”

“What is there to be scared of?”

“And you’re bringing the girls along!”

“If you are worried, then why aren’t you coming with us?” Aiza knows that Khaliz does not allow her and the girls to travel far without him unless he was out of the country.

“Are you mad at me?” Khaliz asks softly.

Aiza looks at her husband’s handsome face, at the pair of eyes begging to be understood.

“You can be too extreme at times!” Aiza blurts.

Khaliz stands up and walks towards his wife at the dressing table. “You have never persuaded me to visit grandfather Jihan before, why now?” asks Khaliz, as he tries to rub his stubbled chin on his wife.

“Who says I’ve never done it?”

“Not like this. To the extent that you want to go by yourself,” he explains.

“I really pity your father. If we don’t go again this time, then that means we have disregarded his message. It’s as if we do not respect his wishes. I’ve realised that there is no benefit in being in dispute with others, especially when they are our own family members,” says Aiza as she stares into her husband’s eyes, through the mirror.
“And what if I still choose not to go with you this morning?” tests Khaliz.

“Then it means you no longer care about me and our children because you’d let us travel such a distance without you,” retorts Aiza.

“And you must be pleased, right?” Khaliz smiles, as he hugs his plump wife.

Aiza does not reply.

“Alright my love, I surrender. I know I always have to give in to you,” Khaliz lets out a sigh. He goes to the wardrobe to choose what to wear before heading for the bathroom.

Aiza monitors his every movement through the mirror. Slowly, a smile of victory creeps over her face.

The girls are overjoyed to learn that they are leaving with their parents. They jump up and down the backseat of the car.

As they pass by Jalan Kebangsaan the beautiful houses on the four-acre land again catch Aiza’s attention. She throws a glance at her husband but Khaliz is busy driving and does not look at the land as he usually does.

Upon reaching Haji Jihan’s place, they see many cars parked near the entrance. Khaliz and Aiza look at each other.

“Whose house is this Ma?” asks Nadia.

“This is not granny’s house!” exclaims Farah.

“Just go in. You have never been here before,” is Aiza’s quick reply.

They soon find out that Haji Jihan has passed away early that morning. Khaliz’s father has been there since dawn. He is busy arranging the funeral.

Aiza and the girls go to the kitchen where the womenfolk are gathered.

“Granny, granny,” call Nadia and Farah, when they see their grandmother peeling onions.

“Oh, my grandchildren! When did you arrive?” asks the old woman, surprised.

Outside, Khaliz is approached by a man his age. He introduces himself as the grandson of Haji Jihan. Khaliz replies that he knows who he is. The man then whispers to Khaliz that he and his father, who is the eldest son, would like to compensate Khaliz for the four acres of land to put an end to the dispute and that the replacement land is ready for
him. Khaliz is so shocked, he becomes speechless. After a while, his lips stretched into a wide smile, as relief overtakes him.

Aiza, who is coincidentally looking outside from the house, sees the wide grin on Khaliz’s face.

“Hm, there’s just been a death and he is smiling,” she mutters to herself in disbelief.

Unknown to Aiza, Khaliz is already dreaming of spending afternoons and weekends with his family. His land hunting mission is over.

Suddenly Aiza’s words echo in his head. “If it is meant for us, you won’t have to strive for it. It will fall on your lap.”

This morning he acknowledges the truth of Aiza’s words.

*Translated by Siti Badriyah binti Haji Md Yusuf*