

A portrait of an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a maroon batik shirt with gold and green patterns. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a light-colored wall with a floral pattern.

CULTURAL
MEDALLION
2013

MOHAMED LATIFF
MOHAMED



Born in 1950 in Singapore, Mohamed Latiff Mohamed is one of the most prolific and well-known writers in the Singapore Malay literary scene, known for his dynamic and distinctive literary style. Besides being a writer and poet, Latiff is also a mentor to aspiring writers. For more than 30 years, Latiff has been an active and longstanding member of the *Angkatan Sasterawan'50* (ASAS'50) executive committee, in which he has served as Deputy President and Youth Wing mentor since 2001.

Latiff's works revolve around the life and struggles of the Malay community in post-independent Singapore. While steeped in a specific historical context, his works touch on fundamental problems facing humanity. At the heart of Latiff's critical reimagining of historia is a man in search of his identity and a meaningful life. A masterful poet and fictionist, Latiff's

seminal and award-winning literary works include poetry anthologies *Bagiku Sepilah Sudah* (Pustaka Nasional, 2002), *Bila Rama-Rama Patah Sayapnya* (ASAS '50, 2007), and novels *Kota Air Mata* (Solo Enterprise, 1978) and *Batas Langit* (Translated and published as *Confrontation*, Epigram Books, 2013).

Latiff's writings are suffused with universal humanism and a rich lyricism. A powerful writer, Latiff is also one of Singapore's most distinguished and lauded writers, whose national and regional accolades include the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award (1998), the prestigious S.E.A.(Southeast Asian) Write Award (Thailand, 2002), the Tun Seri Lanang Award (Malay Language Council of Singapore, 2003) and the Singapore Literature Prize (National Book Development Council of Singapore, 2004, 2006 and 2008). Within the Malay-Indonesian speaking archipelago, Latiff is widely examined and

celebrated for the distinctive style, themes and perspicuous social commentaries presented in his body of work. His writings have been featured in numerous local, regional and international anthologies, and selected as 'O' and 'A' level literature texts for schools in Singapore and Malaysia.

An outstanding literary talent, Latiff is also active in the Malay literary community and an inspiration to other writers. He remains actively engaged in critical writing for *Berita Harian* while constantly expanding his written repertoire.



Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (second from left) at a Literature Symposium in 1985

MOHAMED LATIFF MOHAMED

A CLAMOUR FOR A DIGNIFIED PRESENCE

By Dr Azhar Ibrahim



“The heroic ideal in humanism is principally neither an act of conformism, of expressing and consolidating what is already known, nor an act of amiable respect for the powers that be. Nor certainly does it have anything to do with self-esteem or feeling good. For what is crucial to humanistic thought, even in the very act of sympathetically trying to understand the past, is that it is a gesture of resistance and critique.”

— Edward W. Said

A dignified presence is one where humanity is recognised and respected.¹ Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, is a litterateur committed to such an ideal. Latiff penned his works with the main purpose to engage, to provoke, and to remind. He writes within the milieu of a cosmopolitan city state, which gives his work a distinctively Singapore character. The literary craft for him is one of discerning contestation; about the cerebral engagement against acquiescence. To Latiff, the imaginative space is imperative to make a viable presence, especially where one's presence in the cultural, social, and political domains remains circumscribed or denied.

A prolific writer who has won prestigious awards and accolades, Latiff has written poems, novels, short stories, essays and plays. An educationist by training, he writes about the gripping realities of the urban poor, the slum dwellers of modern Singapore,

apart from the pervasive conditions of apathy, timidity and the crippling historical amnesia, that are always gripped by the dominant myths and manipulations. Within the Malay literary circles, he is known as a poet who speaks his mind, and hardly any groups are exempted from his scrutiny, especially those in power and influence.

Born in 1950 in Singapore, Latiff began his writing career during the time of political perplexities and anxieties of the post-independent era. It was a period of intense development in the republic, which saw some maladjustment and alienation, especially amongst those who found it hard to cope with the sheer lack of any comparative advantage to participate in the modern economy. Latiff confronted the exogenous prejudicial stand while lambasting the endogenous malaise and apathy. The struggle of the poor within the Malay community, the long historical neglect, the ambivalence toward them, and the blaming for all their deficiencies, became the subject of a fiery pen.

His debut novelette *Kota Air Mata*, (1977) narrates this commendably. Ani, a young teenager is unable to cope with the severity of poverty: hunger, no money for school or to pay for examination fees, a dilapidated home and much more. A drunkard father and an unsympathetic teacher worsen her plight. Finally

¹ This is what constitutes a decent society, which according to Avishai Margalit, one whose institutions do not humiliate people....A civilised society is one whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people...A decent society is one that fights conditions which constitute a justification for its dependents to consider themselves humiliated. A society is decent if its institutions do not act in ways that give the people under their authority sound reasons to consider themselves humiliated. Refer, *The Decent Society*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 1, 10-11

Azmi, a philanderer, cheats her, leaving her disillusioned. The futility of life becomes more obvious. When she ends her life tragically, this bustling city has no time to weep her demise. Her loss has no meaning, but only the pain it causes to her poor mother and her repentant father. This is exactly the point that Latiff wants to make—the unfortunate poor have no presence in the city where only wealth, efficiency and productivity count.

The experiences Latiff has undergone as a youth have made him see the intensity of societal and human problems. True to the spirit of the reformers, he tirelessly reminds his audience of the need to be conscious of their diminutive presence, for history will totally omit them if no reconstruction is undertaken. His poem *Melayu Baru* (The New Malay) points to this. Without preaching or assigning blame, Latiff does not shy away from openly discussing this. He is also not compelled to coat it in manner palatable to those who are sensitive to politics.

This makes his affiliation to human conflict as strong as his experiential path as seen in his novel *Batas Langit*.² The depiction of poverty that the protagonist, Adi endures retells Latiff's own struggle over poverty growing up in the slum in the eastern part of Singapore in the fifties. The lives of the wretched in pre-independent Singapore are depicted lucidly amidst anxiety and

tension. This semi-autobiographical tenor endows a strong sense of realism to the novel's structure, still with sentimentality and emotion, as the novel ends with a page on separation. The sickly Abang Dolah tells Adi upon hearing the news of the separation of Singapore from Malaysia: "Betrayed...future...bleak. You have...no...future!" While this has been suggested as typical of Latiff's pessimism, it warrants a critical scrutiny as to what will unravel in the post-separation era, especially to the future of people like Adi.

Sensitive to the plight and the future of the wretched in the city, Latiff demonstrates great empathy with the lives of the urban poor, primarily amongst the Malay community, which constituted the bulk of such a class. Though to some, the tone of pessimism can be detected, his persistency to speak for the underdogs suggests that a more empathic posture can be adopted towards this group. He has no pretension to be their savior, but he does not avoid speaking up for them, in imaginative verse and narrated prose. This is because he writes for his community, and he sees the latter not isolated from the life of the nations' citizens, nor from the larger matrix of humanity.

In crafting his poems, Latiff gives primacy to the voice for justice and dignity. He writes them with full conviction from his sensitivity to the cruel and ironic realities of life, not simply to fulfill a certain literary slogan. He has admonished his fellow Malay writers for their disinterestedness to even speak up, narrate and retell what needfully ought to be. Apart from his abrasive words, wit, humour and satire fuel his creative imagination. The satirical short stories of *Pancasona* (The Utopia of Pancasona) and *Mondok* (Rat) explore the theme of exploitative power as well as the search of freedom, while the crisis of leadership



² This novel has been translated to English with the title *Confrontation*. (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2013)

attenuates it. Side by side are works of realism, an especially moving one like *Pungut Alias Zahara Alias Yap Siew Hong*. Mak Bedah adopts a Chinese baby whose parents wanted to abandon her as she was deemed to augur bad luck. Despite her multiple disabilities and the doctor's poor prognosis, she lives. Mak Bedah prays that God will take away Pungut's life first for fear that if she predeceases Pungut, nobody will take care of the child. This story points to a much deeper existential question, that the persons with severe disabilities living amongst us not only have the right to live, but that their presence has the purpose of compelling us to ponder about life.

As a poet, Latiff believes in the power of words and the imageries of history to point to the future. They are not ornamental although his corpus is no less romantic. Sometimes it soothes as much as it confronts the consciousness. Brevity marks his use of language, especially in his prose. His explicit usage may make the grammarians and the doyens of politically correct commissars shudder. He prefers to directly provoke his readers over offering them aesthetic pleasures with rhythmic verse and intricate plots. To dream and lament the past is outdated. Writers should instead take up the predicaments of the present, a sacrosanct task, a *noblesse oblige*.

Growing up in Singapore and witnessing the turbulent political era of the fifties and sixties, till the birth of the new nation in 1965, Latiff's social experiences have made him identify himself as a writer aligned to nationalistic endeavours. He speaks about his Malay society in relation to the nation, and in an unmistakably defensive tone. The latter posits that their rights must be accorded inasmuch as their duties are exacted. One may say he trods the thin line between defensive nationalism and triumphant nationalism. In the latter moral reasoning is overshadowed by ethnic sentiment, while in defensive nationalism the aim is for social justice and rights. Latiff maneuvers these intricacies with care, sometimes with success, and at other times he himself entertains it unconsciously. But in all, the notion of a universal humanity, as informed by his cultural tradition, tempers the excesses of his sentiment.

His provocative utterances, read by many as his tenor of angst, actually reflect his persistent commitment that literature should speak truth to power, and take pride in tradition and history. Feudalistic hierarchy, religious exclusivity and class arrogance however has no place in his vision of humanity. His poems are marked with the tenor of engagements compelling readers to stand against dehumanised existence, and life that is not accorded any respect. While many may not be comfortable with some of his fiery angst, his will and incisive craft to interrogate acquiescence, timidity and hypocrisy is duly respected. While



critical of the power of establishment, he does not romanticise the powerless as he equally demands of them of moral rigour and the will to act.

Latiff rejects the flight from this world. His temper is one that calls for facing up and meeting challenges of opposition and dissent are weighed against authoritarianism and obscurantism. The former erects injustices, the latter muddles the thinking of the people. He wants his readers to confront these as much as he resolves to face up to the same, as announced in an enigmatic symbolism in *Tekad* (Resolved).

*If this night shall be solemnised
I shall hold the hands of my people
To the well of serene fiery shades
Marking the resumption of my struggle*

*If the bridal's meal gleams
I shall burn the night with candle light
With flowers of seven seasons
Like Jebat return in dagger's strike*

Latiff's works hallmark national literature in the regional literary map, situating Singapore Malay works within our national literary heritage, if not the region. The value of his literary humanism lies in his avowal against detachment and disinterestedness, in the face of a dehumanised existence. A dignified presence in life is an act of courage, determination and commitment to humanity, morality and history. The failure is death, akin to a traditional Malay maxim that forewarns "*hidup segan mati tak mahu*".³

3 Literally it means "to live one is reluctant , to die one refuses".



Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (first row extreme right) at the GAPENA dialogue at Library@Esplanade, 2005.



Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (back row third from right) at the 2003 S.E.A. Write Award with Prince Bhisadej Rajani of Thailand

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ABOUT THE WRITER

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WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ I would like to thank the National Arts Council for the Cultural Medallion. This award is the highest recognition from the government of Singapore to Singaporean artists.

I feel very lucky to be chosen as a recipient of this honoured award. This award is also a sign that Singapore is at the pinnacle of moving towards maturity in building a cultured society that appreciate the arts and artists.

I would also like to thank ASAS'50 for their trust and having me nominated as a Cultural Medallion recipient for 2013. ASAS 50's deeds, I will cherish as long as I'm still alive—or as the Malay saying goes, 'selagi hayat dikandung badan'.

This award has inspired me to continue contributing my creativity to Singapore literature. It proves the government's concerns in the fate of our writers and their works. This award serves as an encouragement and ignites the creativity of our local writers to continue producing works.

May this Award put Singapore on the world map of the literary world.

Thank you National Arts Council and I hope the Council continues with its efforts to enrich the arts scene in Singapore.

I accept this cultural award with endless gratitude to God and may I continue to contribute to the scene as long as He wills.”

Mohamed Latiff Mohamed