

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION  
(HIGHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS) AND SECOND MINISTER FOR  
DEFENCE AT THE 13<sup>TH</sup> MALAY LITERARY AWARD PRESENTATION,  
28 OCTOBER 2017, 2.30 PM AT FOUR SEASONS HOTEL**

Assoc. Prof. Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, Senior Parliamentary  
Secretary, Ministry of Education & Ministry of Social and Family  
Development and Chairman, Malay Language Council of Singapore,

Mrs Rosa Daniel, Chief Executive Officer, National Arts Council

Assoc. Prof. Hadijah Rahmat, Chairman, *Anugerah Persuratan*  
Committee,

*Anugerah Persuratan* Judges and Award Recipients,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start with a pantun:

***Jalan-jalan di Bukit Bendera***, (Went for a walk at Bukit Bendera)

***Berehat sebentar di tengah hari*** (Rest for a while at noon)

***Kalau tidak kerana sastera*** (If it is not for literature)

***Tidaklah saya sampai ke mari.*** (I may not be here today).

## Introduction

1. Good afternoon. It is my pleasure and honour to be here at the 13th *Anugerah Persuratan* Presentation Ceremony. I am sure our literary fraternity looks forward to this biennial event, as it is not only a platform to acknowledge our fellow writers and activists, but also an opportunity to meet friends and strengthen camaraderie.

## Importance of Literature

2. We are all here today because we know the importance of literature. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a famous Indonesian writer wrote in one of his books<sup>1</sup> that without loving literature, we are just clever animals. Rather extreme, but it does sum up the importance of literature in our lives. It serves as the thread that pulls together the fabric of society, demonstrates and dramatises a wide range of human, political, social and cultural issues that help society understand complex issues in a highly globalised and changing world.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Bumi Manusia* (The Earth of Mankind) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer was first published in 1980. The book has been translated into more than 38 languages.

3. More importantly, literature provides a safe and common space to interact, build trust, exchange thoughts and opinions, even when others try to exploit differences and divide our society. All these are expressed in beautifully crafted phrases and aptly chosen profound words.

### **My Language Journey**

4. My language journey started with Mandarin. The more I learnt, the more I read and the more I used the language, I found that it is rich in history and culture. I began to appreciate the beauty of the language with every poem and stories that I read.

5. Then I learn English. It allows me to get my ideas across efficiently. I use it at work and with friends. Being able to speak in Mandarin and English enables me to code-switch when I need to.

6. Currently, I am learning Malay. I realise that there are many community and cultural elements in the language and literature. Words that explain community engagements, such as “gotong-royong”, “kunjung-mengunjung” bring about social cohesion among the community. Learning nuances of the Malay language is also important in promoting cultural understanding. For example, the Singapore Writers Festival

had a Malay word for their theme last year – Sayang. It is a word with multiple meanings used to express effusive love and adoration, but also pity and a bittersweet sense of lost opportunities.

7. And we need to start teaching these fine nuances early. One of the ways would be through our children books, just like we enjoyed reading about *Badang*, *Singapura dilanggar Todak*, or *Pak Pandir* when we were young. Exposure to reading at a young age is important, reading Singapore literature is equally as important to introduce our children to our heritage woven in our stories.

### **Introduction of Children’s Picture Books Category**

8. In this year’s *Anugerah Persuratan*, we are introducing a new award category – Malay language Children’s picture book category. We acknowledge the importance of having quality books that can spark children’s interest to read Malay language books and also for parents to read with their children.
9. Reading books together with children provides meaningful parent-child bonding, reading then becomes a nurturing activity that will bring parent and child closer. Through good books, children learn important communication skills and cultural values.

10. By introducing this new award category, it is with the hope that it will incentivise writers and publishers to keep expanding the boundaries and continue in their efforts to develop quality children's literature, especially Singapore literature.

### **Support for the Development of Malay Literature**

11. The development and promotion of Malay literary arts has always been one of the National Arts Council's priority areas. There are also many national platforms in Singapore to cultivate the appreciation of writing and literature – National Library Board's Read Fest, Bulan Bahasa by the Malay Language Council, Golden Point Award which is an initiative by the National Arts Council, to name a few.

12. The National Arts Council's commitment towards the development of Malay writers has been displayed through the various initiatives such as the NUS-NAC Malay Writers Residency<sup>2</sup> and BH-NAC *Mencari*

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<sup>2</sup> The partnership between NAC and NUS Department of Malay Studies to develop a Creative Writing Residency at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, emerged out of NAC's efforts to address the lack of structured creative writing programmes in Singapore to develop young, emerging writers especially in the vernacular languages at the tertiary level as well as create professional and artistic development opportunities for Singapore writers to be engaged as a Writer-in-Residence. NUS had previously appointed Assoc. Prof Zakaria Ali (Malaysia) (Aug 2014), Mr Suratman Markasan (Jan 2015), Mr Suraidi Sipan (Jan 2016) and Dr Faisal Tehrani (Sep 2016).

*Kristal* Programme<sup>3</sup> as well as through the grant support for Malay language publications.

## **Regional Platform for Malay Literature**

13. At regional level since 2012, Singapore, represented by the Malay Language Council has been a member of Mastera Southeast Asian Literary Council that discusses the development and promotion of Malay literature at the regional and international level. Our writers too, have been acknowledged and received various regional awards organised by the Mastera member countries. These include Mr Suratman Markasan, Mdm Noor Hasnah Adam, Mr Johar Buang, Dr Azhar Ibrahim and last month, Mr Hassan Hassa'arie, who received the Young Writers Award. This is a good development for local Malay literature.

14. We will continue to support the promotion of Malay literature, including translation to reach more audiences. The National Arts Council will continue working with industry partners to develop and strengthen the quality of publishing, and expand distribution and retail networks for

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<sup>3</sup> BH-NAC Mencari Kristal 2016 is a four month programme with the objective to discover new literary talent and support creation of new content especially contemporary genre fiction (e.g. crime, romance, etc) that is lacking in the Malay literary scene

Singapore Malay literature. This will pave the way for a more vibrant and professional scene.

## **Conclusion**

15. I would like to congratulate the Malay Language Council of Singapore for successfully organising the 13th Malay Literary Award Presentation. Also, I would like to extend my appreciation to Assoc. Prof. Hadijah Rahmat, chairperson Anugerah Persuratan and Dr Sa'eda Buang, head judge of this year's awards, for their hard work and tireless effort in making the award ceremony a success. The writers we honour today have indeed made significant contribution to growing and shaping Singapore's literary heritage. My heartiest congratulations to all award recipients.

16. Thank you.