

Headline **The people's poet**
Date **06 Sep 2009**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **StarMag**
Journalist **PRIYA KULASAGARAN**
Frequency **Weekly**
ADValue **17,775**

Language **English**
Page No **17**
Article Size **475 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
PRValue **53,326**



The people's poet

A writer branches out from his solitary profession in his attempt to reach out to people.

By PRIYA KULASAGARAN

starmag-feedback@thestar.com.my

LOOKING like a wizened wizard from a fantastical realm, national laureate Datuk A. Samad Said is quietly musing over recent events amidst the chatter of passers-by and travellers in the KL Sentral train station.

"Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and the National Translation Institute just had an 'early' 75th birthday celebration in my honour," says Samad (he turns 75 next year, in April).

"They gathered an assortment of poets to read my work, director Nam Ron staged a short play based on excerpts from my novels, there were workshops organised by university students – it was all a good effort."

As he shares his pleasure at watching his words interpreted by the next generation of poets, writers and performers, the national laureate says the unexpected: "I'm not very interested in literature any more really."

Crossing boundaries

With over 50 books as well as numerous poems, essays, short fiction and plays to his name, Samad is perhaps the most well-known artistes in Malaysia – so what can possibly explain the loss of interest?

"I still do write, of course," he says with a laugh.

"It's just that now there are different things occupying my mind, among which is this desire to explore other art forms."

Samad is referring to his foray into the arts, which has resulted in exhibitions of paintings and unusual collaborations with musicians such as folk singer Meor and pop sensation Ferhad.

He also reckons that the current state of the world has inspired alternate forms of expression for his views.

"I think that when I was younger, I was too involved with literature. I ignored everything else.

"With age, as well as the accumulation of books and articles that I have read, I have opened my eyes to other things in life such as politics

Headline **The people s poet**
Date **06 Sep 2009**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **StarMag**
Journalist **PRIYA KULASAGARAN**
Frequency **Weekly**
ADValue **17,775**

Language **English**
Page No **17**
Article Size **475 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
PRValue **53,326**

and the economy.”

While he may feel the need to “actively participate”, it can be argued that the common theme in all his work is the inclusion of social commentary.

Samad agrees with this notion, but is quick to add that if analysis unearths any such commentary in his work previously, it was entirely subconscious.

“As a writer, as an artist, I feel that my job is to speak the truth of what went on in each decade – be it colonisation, racial tension or poverty.

“It’s only in recent years that I have made a concentrated effort to communicate the ideas with equal force as the language used.”

Truth, he stresses, is the ultimate goal of all his art.

Mass connection

Truth-telling then may explain his continued popularity with the younger generation.

Frequently seen at coffee shops and on various modes of public transportation in Kuala Lumpur, Samad has always had an enigmatic ability to connect with the pulse of the city, and especially, the young artistic life of KL.

He is visibly excited to talk about the work of young artists and activists, enthusiastically voicing his support for the concerns of the country’s youth.

“More and more young people are acknowledging their power to go out and map their own world instead of just sitting back and letting their elders dictate their lives.

“If we allow them space to express themselves, the process can be a very constructive one for all. If you continue clamping down on them, they will just find new platforms for expression.”

Putting his money where his mouth is, Samad’s days are filled

with youth-driven activities: amateur poetry readings, school (and even prison!) visits, music gigs in small smoke-filled nightspots, or having coffee sessions with his young fans.

“They’re not fans,” he corrects. “They are my peers; the learning process and inspiration goes both ways.”

Leaving his room

While his latest poem, *Peludah Bangsa*, a thinly veiled critique of contemporary policies regarding race relations, may ignite some controversy, it is the fanfare over language that has pushed Samad into the limelight of late.

He was one of the notable figures who was against the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English; those who felt this way held demonstrations that led to face-offs with water canon earlier in the year.

He insists that his vocal opposition is not a matter of politics, but of law.

“The National Language Act of 1967 says that Malay is to be upheld as the national language. If the government decides that we should revert to English, then they should change the Act first. If they do that, I say go ahead.”

He elaborates that he is not actually against the English language (“I voraciously read English books”) but maintains that priority should be given to a country’s official language.

“At the same time, improve the standard of English. Improve the standard of Chinese and Tamil as well. If we’re talking about 1Malaysia, then why not bilingual students?”

As he speaks about the need for translations and emerging authors, it is clear that Samad remains a man of words; his literary aesthetic has merely transformed and channelled into other forms.

And that transformation could

perhaps be explained by the constant mention of his own mortality. The asides about his age reveal a man that has given a lot – perhaps too much? – to the rather solitary act of writing, and is now seeking

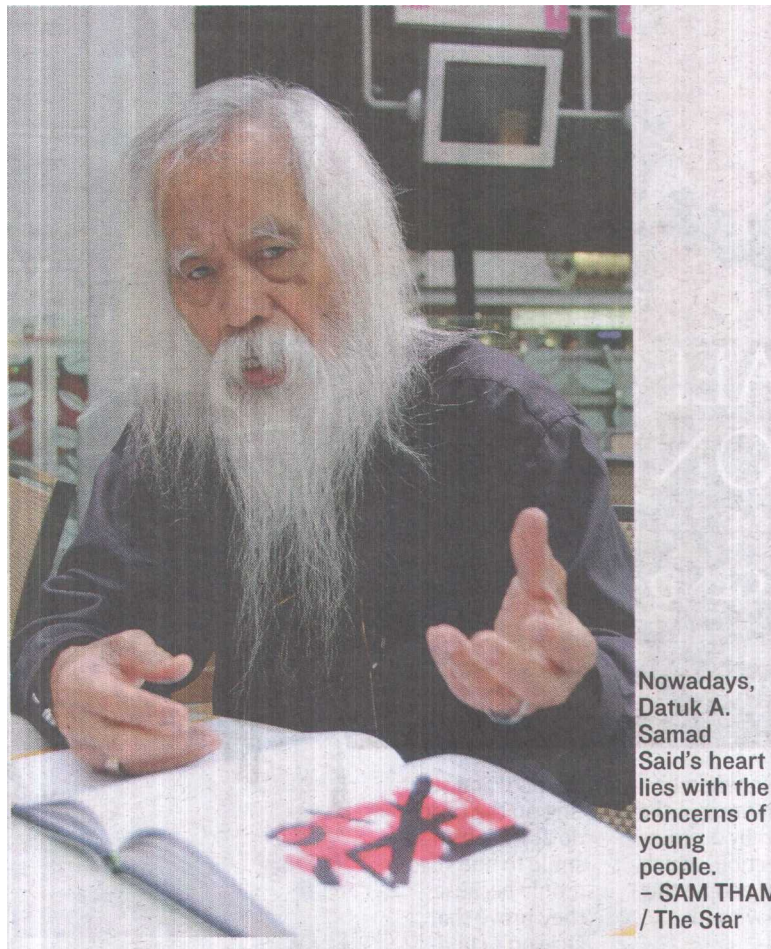
Lumpur; www.mphonline.com.

balance in other aspects of his life.

“I’ve written enough; I’d rather help and support the younger generation with their creations. I’d rather spend whatever time I have left with people than holed up in my room, writing.”

Headline **The people s poet**
Date **06 Sep 2009**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **StarMag**
Journalist **PRIYA KULASAGARAN**
Frequency **Weekly**
ADValue **17,775**

Language **English**
Page No **17**
Article Size **475 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
PRValue **53,326**



Nowadays,
Datuk A.
Samad
Said's heart
lies with the
concerns of
young
people.
- SAM THAM
/ The Star