

Winner of
the Cultural
Medallion

A NOVEL

SURATMAN MARKASAN PENGHULU



TRANSLATED BY

SOLEHAH
ISHAK

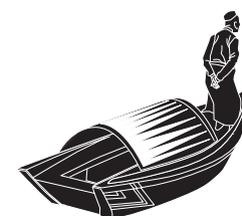
Penghulu

OTHER BOOKS IN THE CULTURAL MEDALLION SERIES

Flowers at Dawn by Singai Ma Elangkannan
Under the Bed, Confusion by Wong Meng Voon
The Earnest Mask by Xi Ni Er
Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops by You Jin

A Novel

SURATMAN MARKASAN PENGHULU



Translated from the Malay by Solehah Ishak

E

EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

Copyright © 2012 by Suratman Markasan
Translation copyright © 2012 by Solehah Ishak

All rights reserved. Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.
www.epigrambooks.sg

Originally published in 1998 by Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd. as
Penghulu Yang Hilang Segala-galanya

Cover illustration © 2012 by Yong Kian Ming
Cover design by Stefany

Consulting Editor: Azhar Ibrahim
Series Editor: Ruth Wan
Editor: Woo Wei-Ling

Published with the support of



National Library Board Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

S. Markasan (Suratman Markasan), 1930-
Penghulu / Suratman Markasan ;
translated from the Malay by Solehah Ishak.
– Singapore : Epigram Books, 2012.
p. cm. – (Cultural medallion)

ISBN : 978-981-07-3535-7 (pbk.)
ISBN : 978-981-07-3664-4 (epub)

I. Solehah Ishak. II. Title. III. Series: Cultural medallion.
PL5139.S125
899.283 -- dc23 OCN810953873

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my late wife, Hajjah Saerah bt Haji Taris,
and my wife, Halimah bt Madon

Contents

Pak Suleh	1
Mak Timun	12
A Meeting	24
My Island	39
Jinns	51
Pak Lassim	63
The Qur'an	78
A Security Guard	87
Juasa	99
Lamit	109
The Island Atmosphere	121
Words	134
Dreams	147
Syed Farid	160
Maiden	172
Failed	186
Orders	196
Bedah	207
Patience	218
Member of Parliament	229
Fate	241

Pak Suleh

PAK SULEH SAT down again in the lazy chair. His eyes looked far out at the sea. He could see people waterskiing. The people looked as big as matchsticks and the boats pulling them as big as matchboxes. That was the view in August 1995. Pak Suleh continued to calmly watch the people waterskiing enthusiastically, but little by little, the view vanished from his sight. Those people and the boats metamorphosed into himself and his boat. He was fishing, his shirt wet with sweat. The sun at ten in the morning hit hard at the exposed parts of his body. Then that view vanished from his sight, and the people waterskiing could no longer be seen either. Pak Suleh sighed weakly, very weakly.

“It’s been five years!” he remarked to himself feebly.

He placed both of his hands, veins bulging, on the steel bars fencing the balcony of his flat. The sea breeze blew unevenly—for a while it was strong, then it became weak. The old, faded pelikat sarong he was wearing would alternately balloon out and compress again.

He looked at the ceiling of his flat. It was white, so clean and white with a ball of a lamp covered with a piece of rounded plastic. Memories of the past slowly invaded his thoughts. He remembered when he was penghulu, the village headman, on the island. He was king of that island. Old and young alike called him “Tok”.

He was the one who settled all fights. For all disputes, he was the mediator. All problems were reported to him and he tried to solve them. And the people always remembered his deeds. If he was sick and did not go out to sea, or if he had things to do on the mainland, they would give him his share, such a large amount of fish, crabs and other types of seafood that he would not be able to finish everything for the next two or three days. Oh! How easy it was for people with power, he thought. If he was experiencing any difficulty, if the roof was leaking or if there were wedding preparations to deal with, all the villagers would come to his aid. But these memories quickly vanished, replaced with images of the time when he and his people were forced to separate and leave behind the island, which had sustained them all that time. It was all for the development of the nation, said the member of parliament. And Pak Suleh, his family and all of his people were moved to the mainland, where they had to live in flats, which were tiny just like birdcages.

Pak Suleh felt depressed. His eyes became circles as he looked at the round light stuck to the ceiling of his flat. From inside, footsteps could be heard moving in the direction of the balcony. Shortly a young boy, about eighteen years of age, approached him and stood to the left of his lazy chair.

“Bak, aren’t you coming in, Bak? With the strong winds, your sickness will come back, Bak!”

Pak Suleh looked down and turned in the direction of his youngest son, ever so briefly. Then he turned to look again at the open sea. He could see Pulau Bukum clearly, an island with its shining oil tanks, signifying prosperity. And far away on the right, his island, which he had ruled for more than forty years, could be seen faintly. If his

father and grandfather were included, their combined rule would add up to over a hundred years.

“Bak, come in, Bak! Later—”

“You and your mother and everyone in this world are all the same!” Pak Suleh interrupted in a loud voice, using the same tone he had used when he was ruling his people on that island a long time ago. “The same! All wanting to just lock me up in a room.” His old, thin hands, wrapped in dry skin, patted the lazy chair. “I’m not a bird! I’m not an animal! I’m a human being, you know.”

Juasa looked down at the bare floor. He had gotten used to his father’s habit of scolding people, especially of late, since his asthma had gotten worse. Juasa also knew that in this case, although his father liked to get angry and scold people, he would calm down quickly; unless of course, someone were to go against him.

“You want to watch TV, Bak?” asked Juasa a few minutes later.

“I’m not obsessed with watching TV like you people!”

“Today they’re broadcasting the National Day celebration, Bak!”

“I’m fed up with all that! It’s always the same old thing.”

“Lim has a colour TV, with all sorts of colours, Bak. Let’s go watch, Bak.”

“Which Lim?”

“Well, which Lim could it be? Pot-bellied Lim, the towkay of the shop when we were together on the island a long time ago.”

“Ah, it’s always the same: people lining up, people carrying guns! I’m hungry! Just let me be, don’t bother me.” Pak Suleh lifted his right hand and rubbed his chest as he drew in long, deep breaths, before slowly exhaling fully.

Juasa looked directly into his father’s face and asked hesitantly, “You’re in pain, Bak?”

The person who was asked this question shook his head. But in truth, the old hand was groping for a young hand. “Get me some medicated oil.”

Juasa hurried inside.

The television announcers related how the people in the parade were forming perfectly straight lines. “How mighty our Air Force looks flying in the sky! Although a young Air Force, it is ready to face all challenges. Our Air Force is perfect, on par with that of other new, emerging nations!”

Tired and breathless, Pak Suleh continued to rub his chest. A short while later, Juasa returned to his father’s side.

“Did you watch TV last night, Bak? Our new President spoke in Malay. He really sounded like a Malay!” Juasa said as he rubbed his father’s chest with oil.

“That’s it, see how even non-Malays can really speak like Malays. And you Malays can’t even pass your Malay language exams. Serves you all right.”

“Look! How fearless they look, our combat group with their striped uniforms!” The announcer’s voice could still be heard.

“There are no Malays there,” observed Pak Suleh weakly.

“Now the leader of the troops is valiantly giving the salute of honour to the President. The crowd is applauding, showing how proud they all are of our combat group, who look so smart and fearless as they march forward courageously,” the announcer continued.

“Ahh, they’re all fair skinned. Not one of them has my complexion,” whispered Pak Suleh to himself.

Pak Suleh’s wife rushed out.

“I already told you just now, don’t stay out in the open too long. But you’re so stubborn,” said Mak Timun as was her habit, while

she took the bottle from Juasa to rub oil on her husband’s chest.

“It’s nothing, don’t you worry,” said Pak Suleh.

“Here, Juasa, you rub your father’s back, I have work to do in the kitchen.”

“Where’s Sohrah?”

“She’s waiting for a friend, said she’s going finicking or beaching or whatever. I don’t know how to say it. Ask Juasa.”

Juasa, who was rubbing his father’s back, answered, “Picnicking by the beach, Bak!”

“There are no beaches any more. All are full of houses!”

Mak Timun rushed to the back. The television continued to show images of people lining up.

“Hey, Mun! Come here for a while!”

The fat sixty-five-year-old woman came back, frowning.

“What else, huh, Pak Yah?” asked Mak Timun in a challenging tone.

“Why do you allow Sohrah to go out with that boy so often?”

“What could she do at home? She’s already more than twenty years old, no good at her studies, why not let her be friends with that Ali. Moreover, Ali is a good boy with a job. Let it be!”

“How do you know?”

“Sohrah said so.”

“Lailahailallahand, you believe what the children tell you? If something happens to that child, you’ll regret it.” Pak Suleh shook his head of white hair.

“That’s enough. Don’t talk too much, don’t think too much, or you’ll get one of your attacks again!”

“You’re all the same—you don’t let me talk, you don’t let me think, you don’t let me get out of the house—you’re all the same!”

“That’s enough, Pak Yah,” said Mak Timun, addressing her husband

as the father of their eldest child, Piyah. “If you get sick, Pak Yah, why, I’ll be the one who’ll be burdened.”

“You all don’t know who I am?” said the already seventy-five-year-old Pak Suleh firmly. “Wasn’t I the penghulu of Pulau Sebidang?”

The fat woman who had dared to oppose Pak Suleh left the balcony, went inside and headed straight for the kitchen. The former village headman who had lost everything simply shook his head. With his old, thin and dried up hands, he began to grope for his son’s fleshy, young hand.

“Go and switch off the TV, Juasa. Don’t waste electricity!” ordered Pak Suleh weakly and helplessly.

A while later, there was only silence inside the room and the sound of hot oil, as if something was being fried, could be heard. In a short while they could smell salted freshwater sepat fish being fried.

“Juasa!” Pak Suleh called out rather suddenly in a sharp voice.

Juasa did not respond, but looked directly at his old father’s face.

The old brows with their white eyelashes moved, and from the aged mouth, a voice spoke, “Where were you coming from just now?”

“From Lim’s house, Bak!”

“What were you doing there?”

“Reading books!”

“What books were you reading?”

“There are all sorts of books at Lim’s house, Bak.”

Pak Suleh made a hissing sound like a horse in heat. “Don’t lie to an old man!”

“Honestly, Bak. We were reading books!”

“When it was exam time, you weren’t reading. Now that the exams are over, you want to read?” Pak Suleh emphasised the word “reading”, and several droplets of saliva flew out of his mouth.

Juasa kept quiet. He knew that his father was getting angry again. And Pak Suleh, who could not be argued with, sighed softly. Both his eyelids were closed tightly, but a short while later, he opened his eyes again and looked at the bare floor.

“If you don’t pass your exams at the end of this year, what are you going to do, huh?” Pak Suleh suddenly scolded Juasa. “Even people who have passed bigger, more important exams have difficulties getting jobs. What about you, who have not passed any exam?”

Juasa continued to keep silent. Pak Suleh looked at his youngest son, who was about five and a half feet tall with long hair reaching to his neck. Juasa was quietly staring at the floor.

Pak Suleh looked Juasa up and down. He noticed that Juasa was wearing tight bell-bottom trousers. He had on a tight yellow shirt with sleeves that flared out at the wrists. He hated to see his son dressed this way, but he could no longer be bothered to say anything about it, because he’d already done so many times before. Juasa still wore the same clothes; he said that it was the fashion of the nineties.

“Even jobs which involve cleaning drains or collecting rubbish are not easy to get any more, you know!” Pak Suleh sighed. He looked out to sea, recalling the time when he was the penghulu and also a fisherman.

“Even going out to sea is no longer as it was.” Pak Suleh remembered the past, a period of sweetness in his life. But just as quickly, his expression changed and he became gloomy.

“Last time I could do as I liked—if I wanted to go out to sea, I could, when I liked, from evening even until dawn as I liked, for days on end, as I liked! Now—” He took a deep breath, leaning back in his lazy chair. Then he exhaled completely, his breathing smooth

and no longer laboured. “You have to get your licence first. To get a licence requires money too!”

“That’s a good thing, Bak, because if—”

“Huh?” Pak Suleh was shocked. “What? What did you say?” His hands waved about as he straightened his body again. “To go out to sea is difficult, to get a licence you have to pay—and you say that’s good?”

“If that wasn’t the case, Bak, why, it’s poor people like us who would be in trouble; the rich would be more than all right. They all have their jobs and could still exploit the sea, Bak, with what, do you know, Bak? With modern machinery, they could catch all the fish to their hearts’ content. They would take all the fish, and we’d be the ones who’d be left empty-handed, Bak!”

“Who said so?” Pak Suleh raised his voice.

“The teacher said so.”

“Which teacher?”

“Cikgu Tan!”

“Cik Tan, who’s teaching you your own language?”

“Yes, Bak.”

“Hey! Difficult! It’s so difficult to live in these times!” Pak Suleh leaned back again in his lazy chair and massaged his chest. He voiced his thoughts. “Last time those teaching the Malay language were all Malays, now those teaching the Malay language are from other races as well. You people, you see, Juasa, see what has happened? They control the land, they control the sea, and they have infiltrated the teaching profession. Your world is finished, Juasa, finished! Finiiisshhed, I tell you, finished, over!” Pak Suleh sighed deeply, losing all hope, losing everything.

Juasa looked down. From the eighteenth floor, cars of all colours, heading west and east along the winding road, could be seen,

reminiscent of the beautiful colours of the rainbow. The people below appeared only as big as dolls, walking with their own private purposes. Those who were running were probably afraid of missing the MRT train.

“You’re not ashamed to face your friends?” asked Pak Suleh suddenly.

Juasa kept quiet and continued to look down.

“Lim, a Chinese; Samy, an Indian; they all could pass the Malay language exam, and you, a Malay, could not.”

From inside, Mak Timun walked heavily towards them. She stood beside Juasa and looked down.

“What is Pak Yah grumbling about again, huh? He’s been rambling for quite some time now! And if he gets breathless, he looks for me!” Mak Timun said without looking at her husband. “This old man is really stubborn. I’ve asked him to rest and be quiet! Still he wants to talk! What was Pak Yah making all that noise about, Juasa, huh?”

“Why, it’s all about your son. I really don’t know what’s going to happen to him. He’s too lazy to study, and the final exams are just around the corner. He failed so many subjects in the last exam—he didn’t even pass the Malay language paper.”

“I know all that already! That mad boy’s behaviour, his womanly fashion, this fashion, that style, but in his studies, so stupid! I don’t know what will become of him. He will end up like the Chinese night-soil collector, maybe.”

“Huh!” Pak Suleh neighed like a horse. “There are no more jobs like that. You don’t know, nowadays, everything is just flushed away!”

“Then he could survey the roads.”

“Singapore has become small. There are these flats everywhere.

Just look at Pasir Panjang. Last time it was just a swamp, a prawn hatchery, now it's full of these tiny flats. Not enough flat land everywhere, why, just look at that!" Pak Suleh gestured with his hands, pointing one by one towards the hilly area behind their flat. "There, even on that hill, they're building these tiny flats."

Mak Timun went and sat in the middle of the doorway, between the living room and the kitchen, and began to grope for her betel leaf container behind the door.

"Both of us did not quarrel before," said Pak Suleh. "It won't be long before we'll have to carry our pillows and roll up our mattresses. You and Sohrah surely wouldn't want to live forever with your older sister, Kak Piyah, and brother-in-law, Abang Samad, who are not so well off either. With Maiden, Syed Farid and the other in-laws... hmmm, don't even hope that they'll ever take you in. They're all rich people," Pak Suleh continued. "We're stupid and poor people, how could we ever live with them."

"Maybe your elder brother, Abang Lamit, might be willing to help you," Mak Timun interjected.

"He just got married two years ago. Surely he has lots of debt to pay, so don't have any hopes," Pak Suleh cut her off.

Juasa continued to look down, pretending not to hear anything. He could see the MRT train leaving Jurong. Juasa really did not enjoy going to school any more. He knew for sure that he would not be able to pass his end-of-year secondary four exams and he was tired of studying. It was only because his brother-in-law, Samad, and his sister, Piyah, forced him, along with the old folks who liked to nag, that he did not drop out of school.

"Your Kak Piyah is staying with Abang Samad. He also has his five children!" said Pak Suleh.

"Even to pay off the housing loan for this flat we're staying in is already so very difficult, you know that, right?" continued Mak Timun.

At that moment Pak Suleh remembered the old house on the island for which he hadn't needed to pay anything. By then Juasa had begun to tire of his parents' talk.

He believed that he would be able to survive even if he did not stay with his brother-in-law and sister. He started to walk inside the flat.

"Where are you going?" asked Mak Timun.

"Going out for a while."

"Eat first! Come, Pak Yah, let's eat!"

Mak Timun followed Juasa. Pak Suleh got up slowly, improving his circulation by straightening his legs, then twisting his body to the right and left.

"What did you cook?"

"Freshwater sepat fish."

It's not the same as before, thought Pak Suleh. In the past, their wooden houses might have been old and dilapidated, but they always had fresh fish to eat. Now they lived in brick flats, towering and tiny like doves' dwellings, and they were all forced to eat dried fish.

Mak Timun

"I ALREADY TOLD you not to let Sohrah go out with that guy. We don't know who he is, who his family is, but you kept on saying, it's all right, let it be, let it be! Now see what has happened! It's been two days and one night that Sohrah has been away from home, bringing shame upon the family!" Pak Suleh spoke breathlessly.

"That's enough, Pak Yah. Don't talk too much. Later you'll have another asthma attack," said Mak Timun weakly.

"Whether I talk or not, I still get asthma attacks, because I'm still alive, Mun, so my mind works and I continue to think about Sohrah. It's better for me to talk, at least I feel some relief."

"Eh, Pak Yah, I don't only think about our daughter, I still have to think about your own health too."

"Again it's about me—I'll get an asthma attack, I'll be congested. I've had this sickness for a long time now, and when I die, one fine day or tomorrow or the day after, it's already been fated that I'll die because of this asthma, so don't you worry too much about me, let's think about our missing daughter, our Sohrah," replied Pak Suleh angrily.

Mak Timun became scared when she realised that her husband was getting angry, that his voice was raised and that he was talking about death. She thought about herself and about her daughter,

Sohrah, who had been missing for two days and one night without any news.

"Where could she have gone, huh?" she asked weakly.

"Didn't I already tell you that this could happen, but you didn't want to listen to me. You said I talk too much. You say I'm this, you say I'm that, but you forget that I was once the penghulu of Pulau Sebidang. Remember? My words still matter. Lousy as I am, I was once the penghulu, you know? Like a king who ruled a country, do you know that, Mun? Now what I've been saying all this while has happened," Pak Suleh said as he sat in his lazy chair and looked out at sea towards the island which had been taken by others.

"It's not that, Pak Yah. I'll feel sorry if you get an attack. It's not that I don't want you to talk but that I love you, Pak Yah. I don't want you to get an attack."

Pak Suleh turned to look at his wife, who was sitting next to the bedroom door. A quid of tobacco protruded from the top right corner of her mouth.

"What did you say, Mun? You said you love Pak Yah? Is it true, Mun?" asked Pak Yah in a teasing voice, grinning to himself.

"Why don't you believe me, Pak Yah?" asked Mak Timun, challenging him.

"If it's true, if it's really true that you still love this useless old man, why was it that when I asked you to continue living on the island, you didn't want to, huh?" Pak Suleh asked, glaring into his wife's eyes.

"Because I love you, that's why I didn't want to do what you wanted! Why, you must surely know, if you get one of your attacks on the island, there is no help, no doctor? Then how?"

"Ahh, it's always the same old thing—my asthma. As if it's the biggest thing in the world," replied Pak Suleh mockingly. "As if you,

Mun, including all your children and children-in-law, are the people deciding how I should lead my life, that I will die because of my asthma. No one in this world except Allah knows everything—how people will die, when they will die and where they will die! Do you know that?”

Pak Suleh looked at Mak Timun for a while, then turned his gaze to the open sea.

“What you just said, Pak Yah, is true. Death is in God’s hands, but we’ve also been asked to think and to do our best.”

“True! True!” Pak Suleh added in a rather high-pitched voice as he jabbed his index finger in the air and glared at his wife again. “But doing our best is not limited to just one way, you know, there are many ways. If you cannot do it this way, there’s that way, if that’s not possible, there are still other ways—that’s what trying means. But what you, your children and your children-in-law did, that’s not called trying, you know. If you really want to know, that’s called ordering. Because it’s been five years, Mun, five years, I say! Since we left Pulau Sebidang, my asthma hasn’t improved. I’ve been to the doctor so many times, I’ve lost count of how much of my own money I’ve spent and how much of your children-in-laws’ money has gone into the doctor’s pocket. Not just one doctor, but many doctors—I’ve forgotten how many—but still this disease of mine refuses to go away.”

“But isn’t that called trying, Pak Yah? When one doctor couldn’t cure you, we went to another doctor,” Mak Timun interrupted as she held the quid of tobacco in her mouth, revealing her teeth which were black due to the sirih leaves and tobacco.

“I don’t understand, Mun, I really don’t understand. All those attempts!” Whenever Pak Suleh mentioned the words “attempt” or

“trying”, he would say them ever so slowly. “Meaning, if I don’t get well with the ways of the doctor, then we must find other ways.”

“What ways? The ways of the medicine man?” Mak Timun blurted out as she removed the quid of tobacco from her mouth, held it between her fingers and spat out her red-coloured saliva into a copper spittoon, which was now no longer available anywhere on the mainland. She then placed the quid of tobacco in front of her teeth until the top right part of her mouth looked swollen.

“That’s just one way, but there are many other ways,” Pak Suleh explained as he continued to gaze at the sea, far away towards his Pulau Sebidang.

“What are the other ways?” asked Mak Timun.

“If you really want to know, it’s what I already told you a long time ago. As far as my sickness is concerned, even if a hundred doctors were to prescribe medication, I would not get better, because, firstly, the medicine is the same, no matter which doctor we go to. Secondly, my sickness remains the same, Mun, because this whole area, the air here is dirty, Mun, dirty. The air here on the mainland is not the same as the air on Pulau Sebidang. The island might be small but there the air is clean. The wind and the air on that island are clean because they come from the open sea and aren’t mixed with all sorts of dirty, polluted air like that on the mainland. Everybody knew this, all the big, important people, all those leaders knew about this. All those clever people knew that in the cities there are just too many factories which spew out dirt, and that dirt has now mixed with the air which you and I are breathing in, which always makes me breathless and causes you to cough all the time. But before we moved here, when we were in Sebidang, I was healthy, without this breathlessness and congestion, and you, Mun, you weren’t always

coughing. Only when we moved to the mainland to live in this birdhouse, all the diseases began to affect us because we keep on breathing all this dirty air! Do you know that, Mun?”

Pak Suleh recalled the atmosphere on his island of Pulau Sebidang, which had been ruled by his ancestors for more than a hundred years. Now it had been passed to foreign hands—whichever nation from whatever foreign world which had been claiming the island was theirs—such that he and his ancestors who had lived on that island for generation after generation had been chased away to live in these birdhouses. They had now inherited these congested breathing diseases.

Why was it that he could no longer enjoy the wind which blows from the sea, which is very much one of God’s incomparable benevolences? He could no longer savour the swaying coconut trees, ketapang trees, beringin trees and other trees which whistled and murmured when caressed by the winds as their dried leaves fell onto the sand, mixed with red and white flowers scattered all over the pristine white beach, resembling the moving clouds on a wide piece of white paper.

I have lost everything, thought Pak Suleh deep in his heart.

“That’s a lot of rezeki that God has allocated for today, Lamin!”

“Alhamdulillah, thanks be to God, Tok. We’ve already separated and kept aside your share, Tok.”

“Don’t, don’t! We haven’t even finished what you gave us yesterday. Moreover, yesterday Pari gave us some crabs. Mak Timun boiled them and we haven’t even finished eating those.”

“Oh, but this is rightfully your share, Tok!” replied Lamin.

“Just sell it to that Lim, you can add to your expenses for another week. Don’t worry about me, Lamit will be back in a while, and surely he too will have his rezeki.”

Pak Suleh sighed deeply, shook his head and closed his eyes for a few seconds.

“If we had just continued to live on Sebidang, surely we would not have had to endure these sicknesses, Mun, and you would always be cooking fresh fish and we wouldn’t have to eat all these dried fish.” He sighed deeply.

“Eh, Pak Yah, how could we continue to live there? That place has been turned into a resort, into a petroleum area. If you had continued to live there now, the air would be as dirty as the air on this mainland. There would be no difference.”

“Five years ago, that was what the member of parliament told us when he wanted to chase us out of that island, where our ancestors were born and died. For our nation! For development! But now, what has happened? Nothing has been done and our island has been neglected. Quiet and still without any development, without any inhabitants either! If I were to follow my heart, right now I would be rushing back to that island, to that place of our ancestors. To Pulau Sebidang which we love!” Pak Suleh cried and looked down at his old and faded pelikat sarong.

Fat Mak Timun removed her quid of tobacco and placed it on the betel leaf container, then she moved slowly towards her husband.

“That’s enough, Pak Yah, stop recalling all these old tales. As if we could ever return to that island. I feel sad just thinking about our place there,” said Mak Timun as she caressed her husband’s chest.

“I’ve lost everything, Mun, everything. First, my power as the penghulu in 1990! Then, when I had to live in this flat, I lost my health, since I could no longer get clean, fresh air. Then I lost my independence. I’m no longer free to move about. I can only stay in this room or go to the mosque. Last time I was free to move

everywhere from north to south, from the west to the east of that island. And we've lost the future of our children. We don't know what the future holds for Sohrah and Juasa. We don't know the future of our grandchildren. They've failed where education is concerned, and education about the hereafter is not complete, and now Sohrah has disappeared. Dear God, what have I done wrong? What wrongs have my family or my race committed so that we've lost everything, everything! Dear God, you the all-loving, all-forgiving, forgive us all our sins! We pray to you and request all help from you." Hot tears fell from his old eyes.

Pak Suleh continued to sob his heart out like a small child. Mak Timun, who was rubbing her husband's back, also shed tears from her old eyes.

For a few moments there were no words from either of them. They were drowning in their own thoughts, drowning in their miniscule selves beside God the almighty, the all-powerful. They were enveloped in a world which knew neither pity nor forgave those who were weak.

"If she had been lost on the island, I would have known where to look for her because I knew every nook and corner of Pulau Sebidang. And if I could not find her in one day, she would still have come back because there wouldn't have been any place for her to hide. But now, it's not that she's lost, she has run away from us, Mun, do you know that? It's not that she's lost but she has run away from us, do you understand, Mun? I've lost everything. We've lost everything, Mun." Pak Suleh sobbed yet again, and memories of when he was the penghulu came back to his mind and floated all around him.

"Tok, all the islanders have gathered, Tok! They're just awaiting your orders, Tok," said Lazim, his main assistant.

"Where have all the people gathered? In the small mosque or in the hall?"

"In the small mosque, Tok!"

"Let's go to the mosque then!"

The Tok Penghulu and his right hand man, Lazim, moved in the dark towards the small mosque, or surau. From afar they could see the dim lights of the mosque. The inhabitants had been gathered by Lazim and the youths of the island within fifteen minutes. The muezzin's call for the night prayers had just ended.

After the night prayers and before reading the duas, the imam had told all the inhabitants of the island not to leave immediately, because the Tok Penghulu wanted to make an important announcement. Members of the crowd asked each other what the important announcement could be.

"Assalamualaikum warahmatullah. May peace, mercy and blessings be upon you," the Tok Penghulu said by way of his opening remarks. "Some of you may already know, but the majority does not know yet. Anyway let us be calm and ask Allah for guidance and protection, for it is he who has been protecting us all this while. And it is from him that we ask for his protection now and always. Gentlemen, on our island now are a group of intruders. They are all hiding on top of Bukit Tanjung, the hill in the western part of our island. The people of this island are afraid to go there because it seems that the place has got its own guardians. But those bad people are not afraid of these guardians, because in reality, they are the guardians. Although they have not disturbed the inhabitants of this land until now, we don't know how much longer this will be the case."

The Tok Penghulu stopped to breathe. The islanders whispered among themselves.

“But as of today, the two telephones that we have on this island, one in the hall and one in the police station, can no longer be used. It seems that those people cut the telephone wires last night. This means that last night they came out from their hiding places and came here, to where we are living.”

People were talking and the Tok Penghulu’s voice was drowned out amidst all the discussions.

“Gentlemen,” the Tok Penghulu spoke even more firmly now, and after all the voices had been subdued, he began again, “that means that they have started to enter our village at night and we don’t know what they will do tonight or tomorrow, so before they can do anything, let us act first.”

“We’ll teach them a lesson, Tok!”

“We’ll attack them, Tok!”

“Gentlemen, they surely have weapons. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have dared to come here. These weapons are probably fire-arms, not the parangs and machetes which you all have. So we can’t just attack them blindly, we must use our brains.”

“How, Tok?”

“That’s what we have to discuss,” said the Tok Penghulu.

“Let’s report this matter to the police, Tok!”

“How are we going to inform the police when the telephones are no longer functioning!” someone said.

“It’s like this, gentlemen, tomorrow we can go and inform the police by taking the boat to the big island. But what if tonight they try to do something untoward?” replied the Tok Penghulu.

Everybody kept quiet. Then there were more suggestions.

“It’s like this, gentlemen, tonight each man must guard his own house. Don’t sleep too soundly. If one sleeps, then another must stay

awake. As to how we will organise this later on, just leave it to the young men and us.”

Pak Suleh sighed deeply and closed his eyes, which had been watery.

“Finally we succeeded in catching five of the bad guys who were hiding on our island. Do you remember that, Mun? Because at that time I was the penghulu and I had people who were loyal to me. But now what has happened to all my people? They are all now living in these tiny birdhouses, just like us. Here a few, there a few, some, I don’t even know where they are living. How are they going to find food for their families? If it was as before, I could order Lazim, Pari and Pagi to gather the inhabitants in the small mosque or hall and within fifteen minutes they would have been able to gather three or four hundred men and surely we would have been able to find Sohrah, but now what do we have, Mun?” Pak Suleh asked as he moved both his thin hands in circles, to demonstrate that they had nothing.

“I, we, have lost everything, Mun. We have lost everything.” And once again Pak Suleh sobbed his heart out like a small child who had lost his beloved toy.

“That’s enough, Pak Yah. What we’ve lost, we’ll never get back. But we must find ways to look for Sohrah, Pak Yah. And if you want to blame me for allowing that Sohrah to go out, then I accept it, since it was due to my foolishness that I allowed Sohrah to go out with that Ali,” Mak Timun said regretfully, then again moved away to sit next to her betel leaf container.

Pak Suleh looked at his wife. “We cannot be so easily influenced by our children’s words, Mun. Juasa is behaving like Sohrah. Many of their wants are provoked by desires, so we really cannot agree to what they say. The mainland is not like our island, Mun. Last time

on the island, Mun, there weren't too many outside influences, unlike on the mainland. Here people have gone to English schools, they are no longer like the island Malays, Mun. They're now city folks, mainland people, Singaporeans, so they've forgotten their origins. The cultural traditions and customs of the Malays have been abandoned, for they've seen how their friends behave. The Chinese and Indians do it, and they want to do it too. Their parents have abandoned religion; they too have done the same. That's the reason why, Mun, I really don't like to live on this mainland. We're buried, submerged in the customs and behaviours of city folks, Mun. If we were drowning in the sea, we could still swim, or there would be others who could help pull us to shore, but if we are drowning in a sea of people, it's like we're being buried deep in a muddy swamp, Mun. If we think we're trying to help people, why, we might even be buried in the swamp of mankind ourselves. Oh God, protect us, protect our families, our children, Sohrah and Juasa. Protect our children. Protect our relatives and our people."

Pak Suleh put both his palms on his old, gloomy face. He got up from his lazy chair and stood by the balcony of his flat, looking far out to sea. The evening sun was reddish in colour, still burning but not as hot as the midday sun. Pak Suleh's enthusiasm was like the evening sun, which emitted a burning reddish light but failed to give off strong, scorching heat. He held his chin with his left hand. He was thinking that if he were as young as in the days when he was first appointed penghulu of Pulau Sebidang by his father, he would surely have done something to get his power back.

"Let's just wait for the children to come over later tonight. I've asked Juasa to call his sisters and brothers and tell them that Sohrah has not come home."

"When did you ask Juasa to do that?"

"This afternoon!"

"Now where has that boy gone? I haven't seen him for some time," said Pak Suleh as he began to roll up his sarong.

"He said he was going to school. There's a football match, he said!"

"That's all he knows! Football! Football! Football!" said Pak Suleh. "He doesn't understand the difficulties his parents are facing. He doesn't know that his sister hasn't come home." Pak Suleh sighed heavily and moved slowly towards the bathroom to perform his ablutions. Mak Timun looked far out at sea where the reddish light of the sun was fast sinking into the horizon. She could hear the muezzin's call for the evening prayers coming from the loudspeakers on their island. The kampung folks were moving slowly to the little mosque. Boys wearing shirts and pelikat sarongs could be seen moving in a crowd towards the mosque.

But now all that could be heard was the muezzin's call for the evening prayers coming from the transistor radio in her kitchen. She went to the kitchen to wait for Pak Suleh to come out of the bathroom. The image of the village on Pulau Sebidang was forever etched in her mind. Although uprooted from the actual place, the images they'd witnessed, as well as their experiences, would not be lost for as long as she and Pak Suleh were still alive.

Pak Suleh was the penghulu of Pulau Sebidang, one of the influential village headmen of the islands of the South. Forced to relocate to a small high-rise flat on mainland Singapore, he worries for the future of his family and yearns for his beloved island. A powerful meditation on loss, *Penghulu* is a portrait of a man struggling to return to his old way of life. But can Pak Suleh thwart the plans of his son-in-law, a newly elected member of parliament from the ruling party? Will the penghulu return to his island?

SURATMAN MARKASAN is the author of six novels, five short story collections and four books of poetry in Malay. He has been a lecturer at the Institute of Education and Assistant Director for Malay and Tamil studies at the Ministry of Education. He has received the S.E.A. Write Award, the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award and the Tun Seri Lanang Award. He was awarded Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2010.

SOLEHAH ISHAK is Professor of Theatre Arts at the Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. She has a Ph.D. in Theatre Arts from Cornell University and has translated more than thirty Malay plays into English, as well as English and German plays into Malay.



ISBN-13: 978-081-07-3535-7



9 789810 735357

www.epigrambooks.sg