

Tan Sri Abdul Samad Ismail

by *Nor-Afidah Abd Rahman*

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Tan Sri Abdul Samad Ismail (*b. 18 April 1924, Singapore*¹–*d. 4 September 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*) was a journalist, political activist, and creative writer, known for promoting Malay nationalism.² He was a founding member of the Gerakan Angkatan Muda (Geram),³ the PAP ([People's Action Party](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-02-04_103701.html)),⁴ and the National Association of Writers (PENA).⁵ For his accomplishments in the literary and journalistic field, he was awarded the title, *Pejuang Sastera*, meaning "literature champion" by the Malaysian Government.⁶

Early life

Samad, who was of [Javanese](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-08-06_115832.html) parentage, was born and educated in Singapore and was effectively bilingual in Malay and English.⁷ He studied in [Victoria School](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-06-06_184600.html) and completed his [Senior Cambridge](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-06-24_110607.html) in 1940.⁸ He launched into journalism almost immediately, starting as a cub reporter in the newly established Malay daily, [*Utusan Melayu*](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1088_2007-06-12.html), in 1941.⁹

Politics

During the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, *Utusan Melayu* became *Berita Malai* – the propaganda machine controlled by the Japanese. Samad was its editor.¹⁰ After the war, the British briefly jailed him for a year in 1946 for his anti-British articles.¹¹ Samad returned to *Utusan Melayu* as its assistant editor after his release.¹² He used his position with the paper to promote Malay nationalism.¹³ His close ties to left-wing Malay nationalists, and his anti-colonial stance led to a second arrest in 1951.¹⁴ This time, he was detained at [St John's island](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_228_2005-01-22.html) till 1953.¹⁵ Upon his release in 1953, he returned to *Utusan Melayu* once again, and also went on to become a founding member of the People's Action Party along with [Lee Kuan Yew](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-03-18_164023.html).¹⁶ However, arising political and ideological differences led to Samad leaving the party in 1957.¹⁷

Samad was posted to Indonesia as a correspondent for *Utusan Melayu* in 1957, where he served only six months before returning to Singapore.¹⁸ He left the paper and joined the Straits Times press in 1958, where he would head the *Berita Harian*, and later the *New Straits Times in Malaysia*.¹⁹ Samad headed for Kuala Lumpur in 1959.²⁰ There, he played a major role in the takeover of the Singapore controlled Straits Times operations in Kuala Lumpur, and the establishment of the *New Straits Times*.²¹ He remained a strong advocate of the Malay language and culture, and he expressed some of these thoughts through his Malay novels which he began writing in the early 1960s.²²

On 23 June 1976, he was arrested again under the Malaysian Internal Security Act for probable involvement of pro-communist activities, and was banned from entering Singapore for trying to subvert the country using political means.²³ The ban was lifted in 1990.²⁴ He returned to the *New Straits Times* after his release in 1981, and was appointed editorial advisor to the New Straits Times Press group, until his retirement in 1988.²⁵

Samad was instrumental in the establishment of the *Angkatan Sasterawan '50* literary movement in Singapore which champions Malay rights. In addition, he also assisted in the setting up of the National Writers Association of Malaysia, and Institute of Language and Literature – Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.²⁶ Samad was the first Malaysian to receive the Magsaysay award for journalism, literature and creative communication arts in 1994. The award is considered Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize.²⁷

Career²⁸

1941–1942: Reporter, *Utusan Melayu*

1942–1945: Assistant Editor, *Berita Malai* during the Japanese Occupation.

1945: Editor, *Berita Malai*.

1946: Assistant Editor, *Utusan Melayu*

1955: Represented the PAP at the Bandung Conference.

1957: Moved to Indonesia as *Utusan Melayu*'s correspondent.

1958: Editor, *Berita Harian* when it moved to Kuala Lumpur.

1974: Managing Editor and Deputy Editor-in-Chief, The New Straits Times group.

1981: Editorial Advisor, The New Straits Times group.

1988: Retired from journalism.

2000: Reappointed Editorial Advisor, The New Straits Times group²⁹

Publications³⁰

Novels

1963: *Kail Panjang Sejengkal*.

1966: *Patah Sayap Terban Jua*.

1967: *Tembok Tidak Tinggi; Orang Jauh*.

1968: *Menduga Lautan Dalam; Menimba Yang Jernih*.

1969: *Detik-detik Cemas; Orang Lama.*

1970: *Hussein Zet.*

1975: *Sutinah.*

1995: *Hud.*

Short-story collections

1959: *Temasya Tinta.*

1967: *Mastura.*

1994: *Ingin jadi pujangga : kumpulan cerpen 1944–1991.*³¹

Others

1957: *Ceramah2 kebudayaan.*³²

1958: *Kursus pengerusi.*³³

1966: *Kursus wartawan.*³⁴

1967: *Bimbingan penulis.*³⁵

1986: *Menimba yang jernih.*³⁶

1994: *Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail menulis.*³⁷

2005: *Edisi pagi.*³⁸

Awards

1976: Malay Literary Award.³⁹

1992: Asean Communication Award.⁴⁰

1994: Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts.⁴¹

1987: Conferred Doctor of Letters degree by Universiti Kebangsaan.⁴²

1988: Named Malaysia's first Tokoh Wartawan Negara (Journalism Laureate).⁴³

1992: Knighted by Malaysia's Sultan⁴⁴

Family⁴⁵

First wife: Puan Sri Hamidah Hassan (deceased).

Second wife: Puan Sri Habibah Hamid.

Children: Eight daughters, two sons.

Author

Nor-Afidah Abd Rahman

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