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TEXT OF SPEECH BY TUAN HAJI SHA'ARI TADIN, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY (CULTURE), AT THE DINNER ORGANISED BY
THE JOINT COMMITTEE FOR LITERARY AWARDS AT PELCOCK ROOM,
MING COURT HOTEL, ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 1975 AT 7.30 P.M.

At this time, when Singapore is celebrating its 10th anniversary of independence, it is appropriate for us to consider whether our cultural and social development has matched our economic development. No country can be considered civilised or developed unless it has produced its own artists, musicians, dancers and writers. While Singapore does not lack artists, musicians, and dancers, it is the last group - the writers - who perhaps are faced with more special difficulties than the others because they have to express themselves through the medium of language.

The role of the writer in society may not always be as obvious as the role of the businessman, industrialist or engineer in our technology-oriented society. But a good writer in his work can reflect the experiences, feelings and aspirations of his people and record the rapid changes in their environment, both social, cultural and geographical, in such a way that it will be a true and artistic work. The writer who is deeply involved in social concerns, who cares about people and their problems and who takes the trouble to record his observations and his feelings truthfully and carefully will perform an immense service in assisting Singaporeans to understand their problems and experiences better and to come to terms with them. A good writer is one who will help to promote a Singapore consciousness and a Singapore identity regardless of the language in which he writes, because the language is only a medium of communication, a vehicle through which the experience is recorded.

Writers in Singapore have traditionally and perhaps inevitably been divided according to the language in which they write, in Malay, Chinese, Tamil or English, because it is only in more recent years that Singaporeans, particularly the younger generation, are

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able to understand and read not only their mother tongue but also at least one other of the languages of Singapore. The reading audience for the writer has therefore been very limited. This in turn led to a very small output of published literary writing in the four languages over the past 10 years.

In our society where our four main languages receive parity of treatment, writers should not be concerned with the old issue of what language to write in but rather should concern themselves far more with what to write about and how to write well.

A recent analysis of the number of literary works published in Singapore in the four languages during the past 10 years has revealed that the number of literary works published in Chinese included 39 novels, 14 volumes of short stories, 11 plays and 71 books of poetry. Compared with works written in English, the number of Malay literary works was also quite high. There were 18 Malay novels compared with only five novels in English during this period, while two Malay plays were published compared with three English plays. Four volumes of short stories in Malay were published as well as four in English. There were 15 books of poetry in English compared with three in Malay which is perhaps because more Malay poetry is published in magazines and newspapers rather than in published collections.

With our relatively high standard of living and high rate of literacy in Singapore, we should be able to produce a large number of literary works and an even larger number of readers. Some writers feel that they are at a disadvantage in writing in one of the four major languages, each of which has its own great literature and literary traditions. But just as Singapore aims to export its manufactured goods to the rest of the world, so too should Singapore writers aim high and strive to reach not only a Singapore audience but a world audience. Because they are using languages which are not confined to one country, they have a better chance of doing so if their work is sufficiently interesting.

In our modern world, language is no longer a barrier. We should be encouraged by the fact that even countries using languages that are not used beyond their boundaries, such as Yugoslavian, Polish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Japanese and even Icelandic,

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have produced Nobel Prize winners in literature whose literary achievements are thus universally recognised.

It is time that an Association such as yours should encourage more literary effort by established writers as well as new and budding writers. It is encouraging to know that the creative writing movement started some years ago by a group of school teachers is now becoming more popular and that it is spreading to all language-medium schools. In the National Library, the teenagers who are members of the Young People's Service contribute short stories and poems regularly to their own magazine which comes out in Malay, English and Chinese.

In order to promote Singapore literature, the National Book Development Council of Singapore has inaugurated a scheme for Book Awards. The aims of the awards are, firstly, to encourage and develop local literary talent, by giving due recognition to outstanding works in the fields of creative and non-creative writing by local authors in any of the four official languages; secondly, to stimulate public interest in and support for local literary achievements; and thirdly, to demonstrate that literature for children and young people deserves the serious attention accorded to literature for adults. These awards are for five categories of books, including fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction and children's and young people's books. Although the Council has solicited donations for these awards, it is greatly regretted that the response to its appeal has been extremely poor. This is where your Association could be of help in supporting such worthwhile projects.

Another important recent development is the move to form a Singapore National Writers' Association which has the aims of safeguarding the interests of writers in Singapore and promoting a knowledge of Singapore literature in Singapore and elsewhere. This Association is expected to be formed soon and it hopes to facilitate the translation and publication of original and translated works of the members of the Association. This Association will be open to all Singapore writers regardless of what language they write in. This is a very good move as it will strengthen the unity and purpose of our writers in Singapore who should be concerned not merely with the problems4/-

the problems of their particular groups but the problems of Singapore writers and Singapore literature as a whole.

I hope that your Association will support this larger Association and cooperate with it in this spirit. With the combined and cooperative efforts of all groups, writers will go far towards stimulating the growth of a truly Singaporean literature which will reflect the lives of our people and which will enrich and enlarge our present literary heritage.

AUGUST 31, 1975.
