

## In Conversation: Dain Said on *Bunohan*, Creative Filmmaking and the Malaysian Film Industry

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Dain Said's name is synonymous with Bunohan, his second feature film that has won several awards, both locally and internationally. This conversation with Dain Said pivots around several matters or issues, namely, the critical reflection of Bunohan itself, the creative process of filmmaking and the Malaysian film industry in general.*

**Keywords:** *Bunohan, Dain Said, critical reflection, Malaysia, filmmaking*

## INTRODUCTION

His award winning film *Bunohan: Return to Murder* (2012) has catapulted Dain Iskandar Said's (henceforth Dain Said) name in the Malaysian film industry. Although the audience's initial reception of the film was lukewarm, positive reviews gradually proved that this film is a slow burner and destined for greater heights. John Anderson from *Variety* (11 September, 2011) (<http://variety.com/2011/film/reviews/bunohan-1117946050/>) applauds the film and writes:

With a list of ancestors that includes Shakespeare, Tran Anh Hung, "The Godfather" and the Bible, "Bunohan" serves up a feast of archetypes and violence amid a story that twines like a basketful of cobras to deliver a movie that's ripe as a mango for a U.S. remake.

Dain Said was born in Kuala Lumpur and then grew up in Tumpat, Kelantan, Cairo and London. He graduated in film and photography from the University of Westminster, London in the 1990s. His first feature film is *Dukun* (2006), which is still banned in Malaysia due to uncertain reasons. One possible reason could be the legal request made by the family of the parties involved in the murder case involving Mona Fandey, the eponymous traditional doctor that the film is said to be based on. Dain is also the recipient of the Nippon Foundation Asian Public Intellectual award in 2007, which triggered the documentary *Cinema of Terror*. He has also directed award winning documentaries, short films, media content as well as advertisements locally and abroad.

His critically acclaimed *Bunohan* manages to rejuvenate the industry by getting Malaysian film fans excited about Malaysian films again. The film was submitted to represent Malaysia at the 85th Academy Awards in the Best Foreign Language Film category. It has won several awards including the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC)

award at the Taipei Golden Horse Awards and the Golden Hanoman Award at the 7th Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival in Indonesia in 2012. *Bunohan* was premiered in the U.S.A, Canada, South America and Europe.

The narrative of *Bunohan* centers on a feuding family—Pak Eng (an emasculated and pusillanimous father), Ilham (the estranged eldest son and a contract killer), Bakar (a school teacher cum businessman) and Adil (a Tomoi fighter—whose blood relation offers a criticism of the failure of the father as the head of the family. Such central conceit allows Dain Said to introduce a veritable alphabet of personality traits related to the characters' monikers. Ilham, the first son from a different mother, is a quiet—indeed closeted—moralist, who dies for what he believes in; thus functioning as an embodiment of the archetypal theme of "blood is thicker than water." Bakar, connotes the idea of the burning primal desire, of wanting so much that he is willing to engulf anyone who comes between him and his ambition. Adil or fairness is the classic arc of cinematic renewal for he epitomises his father's dream for a better, i.e., ideal, future as a family. Ilham sees this sense of existential renewal in Adil; hence using his brother as a way of redeeming his path albeit via death. Pak Eng is constantly evoking his youngest son's name to contrast with the scheming Bakar. The exploration of these themes through intimate examinations of the narrative about fractured father and fatherhood resonates as a universal theme of the mythologised sense of redemption.

With such eventful and colourful achievements, Dain Said is now seen as a respectable and an important Malaysian contemporary filmmaker who has reached beyond Malaysian shores. Therefore, it is significant to listen to his discourse about film and filmmaking as it mirrors his contemporary critical view of this country and region. Indeed, it is crucial to know the influence of his work on the Malaysian film industry.

The interview reveals a few crucial matters related to the creative process of filmmaking. The importance of having an idea that lingers long enough is foregrounded by Dain Said, which he concatenates with the centrality of exploring one's own cultural psyche. Here lies the need to understand one's subjectivity, of how the social construction of one's

understanding of the world is perceived as dialogic, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. The creative process, according to Dain Said, continues without the need to conform to Sergei Eisenstein's idea of locating the audience at the heart of filmmaking. In effect, for Dain Said, a good storyline can determine a good quality film.

I met Dain Said at his quiet office and asked him questions that pivot around three themes: his award winning *Bunohan*, his creative filmmaking process and the Malaysian film industry. The conversation is edited for clarity, cohesion and space but remains verbatim.

## THE CONVERSATION

**I: How do you feel about the reception of your film after winning a few awards abroad?**

**DS:** Of course we are happy that it's gone that far. And I think for a Malaysian film to go that far, that's good. And it's not just good for us, but hopefully it's also good for the industry. And in many different ways, not just in terms of showcasing and recognising, that there is an industry in Malaysia. Although, of course there had been other films that have also travelled abroad, coming mainly out of the independent sector such as the Da Huang people. Chinese filmmakers have been doing this for the last ten years. And so that's a good thing, I'm happy.

**I: What and who has been your major influence?**

**DS:** Film is a moving medium and deals with time and space. It's a temporal medium that deals with time. So for me, it's people like Tarkovsky who always deals with time (he's a Russian filmmaker) and Kieslowski, who also deals with time. His name is Andrei Tarkovsky. And then there's also Krzysztof Kieslowski, a Polish. And I also like (Alejandro Gonzales) Inarritu, who deals with time. And of course, great filmmakers who deal with memory and time from the documentary segment, such as Chris Marker. In terms of stories and structure,

I particularly like the Iranian cinema, and I do like films coming out of China. But of course, in the past, I've liked the old time Hollywood directors like Elia Kazan, and I do like people like Raoul Walsh. I do like a lot of narrative films like those from Hollywood and Europe as well. So, my taste in films is quite specific, but it is also broad so that it goes across a lot of cultures. I have always been a fan of Terence Malick's films, from *Badlands* onwards. And then, of course, don't forget the early Hollywood people—the New Hollywood as they called them—people like Martin Scorsese (he's been in since the 70s) and (Francis Ford) Coppola. So they have been two of my favourites, actually, since time immemorial. But Italians, I do love Francesco Rosi more than all the others. And I love the German cinema. I always love the German cinema, the early days...

**I: It strikes me as I was watching *Bunohan* that it is quite similar to German expressionism and also to the noir genre as well. Were they in your mind then?**

**DS:** Yes, noir and Western were very much at the back of my mind. It did show through in terms of the German cinema simply because, as you notice, in *Bunohan*, I don't have people who express themselves emotionally almost melodramatically. It's quite cold, it's quite distant, it's quite broody and distant...which is, like, a lot of German cinema...quite distant. I don't get into...emotional melodrama. And that was a conscious decision on my part. I'm thinking more of actually, people like...the early works of Fassbinder. Well, the works of (Michael) Fassbinder and the works of Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog. You hardly see any of those

films, they are kind of like shutting each other, it's just going to get involved emotionally and very intense. It's a quiet intensity that I prefer rather than an overblown intensity.

**I: What comes to your mind first in the process of, let's say, "I want to make a film"?**

**DS:** It's always the idea. The idea can be triggered by many, many different kinds of things in different ways. An idea can come from any different source at any given time. And then I work on the idea.

**I: How do you decide that that idea is the very idea that you can actually start with, or is worth pursuing?**

**DS:** I don't know. To be honest, I don't know...the idea speaks to you, you begin to work on the idea, and then it unfolds...of course, there is a point when you think it's worth looking at or it's worth doing, because you are grabbed by it, it holds you. For me, what's important is that the idea is worth pursuing and when I look at something, which might strike me as having a story...that can carry the idea...that's strong enough. And whether the idea can actually tap into areas of my own culture.

**I: Do you think of the audience at this stage?**

**DS:** I don't think of the audience or anything at this stage, but I just think of an idea, and that that idea is interesting enough, and I think I can make something interesting out of it. And it provides a different angle. It's not something we automatically think about, but it develops and it's a process. And in the process...after *Bunohan*, and especially after *Dukun*, we know that there's an area or territory that I would like to carve out in terms of things relating to my culture. And at the same time, as a filmmaker, I also have to be aware (my producer too)—

there's the company and a brand we think about—how they work within the context of our market, and our context as well in the society. So the process becomes a whole package that needs to be thought around the idea. But I do the ideas, and the thinking around it. I work very close with my producer, but she takes care of all the other aspects.

**I: You are also the scriptwriter for *Bunohan*. Do you think this formula always works?**

**DS:** Yes I am. But, no, there are two ways actually how this formula works. In the West, you have a long-standing relationship with the writer. But that comes much more out of an independent tradition. People like Inarritu, for example, in Mexican cinema, and there are others from the European tradition elsewhere in the world, who continue to work with the particular writer that they like. But it doesn't always mean that those are the perimeters. One, because we are independent. And two, given the context of certain places, like, for example, Malaysia, where, I have to say this, I don't think there are a lot of good writers. And so therefore...you have a writer and you find somebody that you can work with, because your references are the same, your intellectual and cultural references are the same. Meaning, we like the same books, we like the same artist, we like the same musicians—there is overlapping. And that makes the process of writing easier. So if my reference is Dostoyevsky, or my reference is Albert Camus, then that other writer will know what I'm talking about. So that's the premise.

Now, outside of that, of course, there's the big studio system, where they get writers for hire. And those writers are darn good. And so therefore, then, within the group of writers that they have, there are genre writers. You have genre writers who are particularly good at horror, or you have genre writers who are particularly good at thriller (stories). But then, there are also writers who come across the board, so then you team up (with them). And sometimes they are not even there. Writers come and go, and writers will come with a specific project to the studios. And then they will choose a director that they feel can fit that bill. But fitting

the bill also depends on many different things. One, whether or not, for example, you have something like *Postcards From The Edge* or *(What's Eating) Gilbert Grape*, which is created by Lasse Hallstrom. You can see why they choose him, that is, because of the kind of films he makes. Or they will choose someone like Michael Mann. It's a different matter, but there are other writers, directors, who are chosen for the project. But, having said that, there are also writers who come up with their own work, as much as there are film studios that come up with their own ideas for projects, and then they choose the writer. So it's a very well developed industry, because you have a lot of writers to tap into.

Now, the reason I write: I like writing, I enjoy writing, I think I can write. But at the end of the day, I'm not necessarily a good scriptwriter or a great one. I think I can do well, but it takes time for me. Put it this way: in a landscape where there aren't particularly many good writers, I think if I'm going to work with somebody, and I'm going to have to hold their hand, I might as well write it myself...one. And two, I have had writers that worked with me, and they don't challenge me. They agree with everything. And that doesn't help me. So therefore, what I'm saying is my primary aim is to make the film. But the process of writing is towards making that film. So whereas, if you have an industry that's very highly developed...the main objective of that writer is to write a good story. And then a director works on it. You know, so constantly I'm wearing two hats.

**I: Where do you situate creativity in that process?**

**DS:** I think there are two things. One is the creativity and another is the discipline of writing... and so the culture of writing itself. The culture of writing concentrates and focuses on what writing actually is. And therefore you learn structure, for example. And you learn all the things pertaining to writing: characterisation, structure, and then dealing with themes etc. You can still do that within a very tightly formulated structure like a genre, or you can still do that in a non-genre. But where is the basis, on the education of writing, and being able to do

good writing? Understanding that as a basis, so we go back. So there's the cultural idea or the cultural condition. But then there must also be an educational one, which is also the practical one, such as the ideas being taught in schools...in colleges, or whatever. Now I'm not saying that I don't know what the state is like, how the curriculum is and how good the teaching is. Likewise, the capability of the teachers or even the universities, which actually produce writers.

Now for a good quality film, you need a strong storyline. How you structure that storyline is up to that writer, or up to that director...at the end of the day, it's the story, a good story. But what does "good" mean? Is it written in a very tight structure? ...if you go with genre, then yes. If you go with non-genre, you're open to a lot more flexibility or, shall we say, looseness, for lack of a better word. But looseness also doesn't mean...it's bad writing... basically it is empty. The structural prescription of what is tight writing, you know what I mean? Within the art house also, you still get good writing...tight writing. A recent example would be *A Separation*, the Iranian film. Or you can see in some European films or even some Chinese films where they don't adhere to genre categories.

**I: What do you think is still lacking in Malaysia?**

**DS:** Well, intellectual production, I mean, not just research and books. But actually in terms of the abstract, or the things that you cannot really put down. But it's actually creating a culture of discussion, a culture of knowledge, between various institutions to be able for them to discuss films. And discuss films analytically, critically. So therefore, then you build upon this idea of cinematic culture that goes beyond just making films and putting out celebrities.

**I: Do you have a checklist of what makes a good film?**

**DS:** No, we don't. I don't work that way. But it's just how the film is constructed. In hindsight, in hindsight only...now that we can look at where *Bunohan* sits within our own cinematic culture, you can see that: One, why is there *déjà vu* in our films? I think, partly, because time passes that people try to preempt time. People don't come up with original ideas. What they do is they see something and they try to imitate it, or emulate it, but that thinking actually comes from...what the problem is...already inscribed within the culture itself, within education. Because essentially, the idea of creativity starts from literature, starts with painting, with all those other elements...and people can then actually imagine, people can then work creatively on their own, and try and bring up their own idea. I get my ideas, for example, from research. And that always triggers ideas...Over the last 20 to 30 years, people have looked at film... from a marketing angle. So therefore, they put the horse before the cart. And I think that's the problem. They aimed at a certain market and then (say) let's do it for this market. There are people, without naming names, who...churn out films every month and that's fine. They want to be a factory. But the saddest thing is...that...has set the standard and the way of thinking. And therefore you can't get out of that box.

**I: My last question, do we have a proper film industry?**

**DS:** In Malaysia, we are following something...which we have no basis. So it's not a highly developed industry, and not highly developed in the sense that it has everything in place, right down to the logistics of production...So that's my point, not having the logistics of production and the right people and the skill set to make what is what I can call probably an industry.

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**Photo 1** Dain Said

Source: <http://apparation.com/dir/the-team/writer-director-dain-said/>