A Post-Colonial Poet with a Quest for Identity

Interview with Malaysian Literary Laureate, Muhammad Haji Salleh

By Md. Salleh Yaapar

Muhammad Haji Salleh is a leading poet of Malaysia and one of the country’s literary laureates. Writing both in Malay and English, Muhammad has devoted his life to the development of the Malaysian literary tradition. He has not only distinguished himself as a poet but also as a literary scholar.

With the colonial heritage as a springboard, Muhammad embarks on a homeward journey in quest for identity and roots. In fact, this quest is the hallmark of his poems as reflected especially in the outstanding collections of Sajak-sajak Pendatang (Poems of the Outsider, 1973), The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II (1975), Time and Its People (1978), Siak–ajak dari Sejarah Malaysia (Poems from the Malayan Annals, 1981), and Rowing Down Two Rivers (2000). To view him at the Faculty Club while he was studying in Britain in the early sixties, some of whom are here today. He is a post-colonial poet and a post-colonial writer, he virtually stopped producing since 1992.

I was more theory-conscious, and I was more interested in being a student, one interested in cultural and cultural works, in identities, in similarities and differences, as well as post-colonial ideas on literature and literature in Europe and other parts of Asia. So to begin with, it was not a simple life that I led, and the person grew on these different earths was equally complex, or even confused.

When I was the Director of the Institute of Malay World and Civilization [Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia] my whole life was directed towards defining the Malay – searching out his etymology, his sense of beauty and poetry. This search was also embarked on by the other part of me, the poet. My favourite works in Malay–Indonesian literature are the proverbs, the pantuns, and Sulalat al-Salatin. Thus, I searched out my roots among these different earths was equally complex, or even confused.

I am still fascinated with The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II. As you may remember, I wrote about it twelve years ago. In this collection, I invoke the image of Si Tenggang. According to legend, having left his poor and ugly parents years ago, the lost son returned to his native village at the command of a ship, and with a beautiful wife, too. Rejecting his parents, he was cursed by his mother, and together with the ship, he was turned into a stone. You consider yourself the second Si Tenggang. In the lead poem – Si Tenggang’s homecoming – you declare yourself a stranger who is freed from the soil. However, compared to the original Si Tenggang, yours is not a total redefinition. To me, the poem reveals some inner conflict.

Yes, Si Tenggang II is partly me too,
language as a political statement of my total return to the language that was marginalized and humiliated by the British. The British educational system prescribed that Malay could only be used for the primary school level. So I was disconnected from the language, my intellectual language was English, and it stayed there for a long time until I taught myself to write in modern Malay, for more than 40 years. A choice of a mother tongue over a colonial language is a traumatic choice for people like me who went to school in that language.

Many of my poems return to the fifteenth-century Melaka, the contemporary traditional village, the market, which still keep the character of the Malaysians. These are post-colonial poems – the poet who has been colonized has come home, and found himself there. Some of my poems even deal directly with England as in ‘England in the spring’ contained in Rowing Down Two Rivers.

I think I have another side of the post-colonial. As a student of literature, I worked out projects to retrieve the important achievements of my people – I collected and am still collecting pantuns throughout the archipelago, sought out traditional concepts in life and literature, transcribed some old and rare texts. These I think, humbly, are also acts of post-colonialism.

Professor Muhammad Haji Salih (b. 1942) studied at the universities of Singapore, of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, and of Michigan in Ann Arbor, obtaining a PhD in 1973. He has taught at various universities in Malaysia as well as in Michigan, North Carolina, Leiden, Hamburg, and Kyoto, and was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. He was Director of the Institute of Malay World and Civilization, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. At present, he is Professor of Literature at the Universiti Sains Malaysia. As a poet, critic, translator, editor, and professor of literature, he has published more than 35 books in both Malay and English, including 12 volumes of poems, while also being for more than 25 years the Chief Editor of Tenggara Journal of Southeast Asian Literature. Salih has received many national prizes for his poetry and criticism/theory, and was named Literary Laureate of Malaysia in 1991. Among his international awards are ASEAN Literary Award 1977, SEA Write Award 1997, and MASTERA (Southeast Asia Literary Council) Award 2000.

mhs0042@yahoo.com

Muhammad Haji Salih, 2003

iii tenggang’s homecoming

I

the physical journey that I traverse is a journey of the soul, transport of the self from a fatherland to a country collected by sight and mind, the knowledge that sweats from it is a stranger’s knowledge, from one who has never learnt to see, think and choose between the changing realities.

ii

it’s true i have gowled at my mother and grandmother but only after having told of my predicament that they have never brought to reason the wife that i began to love in my loneliness, in the country that alienated me they took to their predilections i have not entirely returned, i know, having been changed by time and place, coerced by problems estranged by absence.

IV

I have brought myself home, seasoned by confidence, broadened by land and languages, I am no longer afraid of the oceans or the differences between people, not easily fooled by words or ideas.

the journey was a loyal teacher who was never tarrying in explaining cultures or variousness look, i am just like you, still malay, sensitive to what i believe is good, and more ready to understand than my brothers.

the contents of these boats are yours too because i have returned.

VI

I have learnt the ways of the rude to hold reality in a new logic, debate with hard and loud facts.

my homecoming is a journey of the soul, a country collected by sight and mind, a country collected by sight and mind, the physical journey that I traverse, the knowledge that sweats from it is a stranger’s knowledge, from one who has never learnt to see, think and choose between the changing realities.

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