

# SI TENGGANG IN THE POSTCOLONIAL ARENA: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE WORKS OF MUHAMMAD HAJI SALLEH

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## Abstract

Muhammad Haji Salleh is a famous Malaysian poet laureate as well as a foremost post-colonial intellectual. This article is a critical analysis of the persona and vision of the poet in his quest to construct his identity and to sustain the Malay language and literary heritage, as may be understood from his works and efforts since the 1970s. It is an expose of a laureate's motivations behind his creativity. In dealing with Muhammad's literary corpus, the article adopts a multi- and cross-disciplinary approach in combining literary criticism with elements of psychoanalysis, philosophy, politics, etc. These elements encapsulate the post-colonial quest of identity-forming, a subject that lies at the core of this article. The "empire writes back" perspective allows an in-depth analysis of motivation, migration and identity-formation as a way to reclaim resources –both tangible and intangible– from the colonisers. Thus, the discussion critically presents insights into the contexts and influences on Muhammad's works, and in turn, his role in sustaining the Malay language and literary heritage.

Keywords: Malay language, Malays literature, post-colonial quest, identity, sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Muhammad Haji Salleh is not only a famous literary laureate but also a foremost intellectual. As a laureate who initially presented a Western intellectual orientation, Muhammad is currently well-known for his passionate search for identity, his love of the language and legacy of his literary heritage, and his critical stand on the colonial legacy/agents. He started by writing poetry in English and later in Malay while he was studying at Wolverhampton, Great Britain. There was a certain dual loyalty in him at the time in relation to the use of language. However, once established as a poet, he stopped writing poetry in English to return to the roots of his tradition and direct his full commitment to the Malay language and literature. Subsequently, as a professor of literature, he devoted much time to sustaining Malay texts of the past and to searching for a poetics of Malay literature which had been sidelined in colonial times.

This paper aims to examine Muhammad's works and efforts in the context of postcolonial literature, particularly the search for identity, the sustainability of the heritage of Malay literature, and the struggle to safeguard the Malay language, as may be understood from his works and efforts since the 1970s. Discussion will be based particularly on *Sajak-sajak Pendatang (Poems of the Migrant)* (1973), *Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II (Travel journals of Si Tenggang II)* (1979), *Ini Juga Duniaku (This is Also My World)* (1977a), *Time and its People* (1978), *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu (Poems from the Malay Annals)* (1981), *Dari Seberang Diri (Faced with the Self)* (1982), *Rowing Down two Rivers* (2000), *Puitika Sastera Melayu (Poetics of Malay Literature)* (2000), and *Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago* (2006). To support the discussion, several critical writings and efforts of Muhammad will also be referred to.

## EDUCATIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Muhammad Haji Salleh was born in 1942 in Perak, but grew up in Sungai Acheh and Bukit Mertajam, Penang. His primary education was in the medium of the Malay language and his secondary education in English. He obtained the Cambridge Secondary School Certificate in 1958. In 1963 he was accepted into the Malayan Teachers College at Wolverhampton, England. It was here that he began writing poetry in English and later on

in Malay (Muhammad 1978: ix). Muhammad obtained his B.A. (English Studies) degree from the University of Singapore and M.A. from Universiti Malaya. While in Singapore, he became familiar with Indonesian literature and was drawn to the literary activities of the members of Angkatan 50 and their struggle to develop the Malay language, literature and culture. In the early 1970s, Muhammad studied at the University of Michigan, USA for a Ph.D degree in literature. During this time he had the opportunity to travel all over America and Europe and to understand the way of life of Western communities and at the same time improve on the quality of his poetry.

At the end of his student days, enriched by Western literary and intellectual ideas, Muhammad returned to his native soil and taught at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. At that point he had stopped writing poetry in English. This was a statement of his commitment to his mother tongue. However, this “post colonial act” did not prevent him from writing in English to produce academic works, translate his poems, and communicate at the international level. In 1977, he was appointed Visiting Professor at North Carolina State University under the Fulbright-Hayes programme. Since then, Muhammad has frequently been overseas to teach, for research, or for seminars. From 1993-1994 for example, he held the Chair of Malay Studies at Leiden University, Holland. In 2004 he was back as Visiting Poet. Currently Muhammad is an Emeritus Professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and continues to go round the world to present seminar papers, research, and give recitals of Malay poetry. To date, Muhammad has published about 15 collections of poetry and 30 academic books. For his great and outstanding contribution to literature Muhammad was conferred the title of National Laureate in 1991 by the government of Malaysia.

## **SEARCH FOR CULTURAL ROOTS AND IDENTITY**

Muhammad’s educational and intellectual background left him in a difficult position within his own community, particularly the Malays of the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, the Malays generally had a rather conservative, feudal orientation to life and respect for religious, social and political leaders. Even though Muhammad was very passionate about his community, his intellectual orientation was incompatible with these conservative and feudal tendencies. His English education and apprenticeship in the West, especially a rational-critical tradition had furnished him with a different view and approach to life. According to this view, the self is the centre of human existence. The

individual is free to speak of thoughts and feelings, and define his own life. In so doing, all individuals are dependent primarily on intellectual strength and experience. It is inappropriate for any community and tradition to inhibit this freedom. Only in such an environment can the true self thrive. It was with this kind of spirit that Muhammad returned from his travels in America in the early 1970s, and right away, declared his intellectual independence. When he wrote criticisms on Malay contemporary literature, he called upon his fellow authors to put aside views and rules of the conservative authoritarian (Muhammad, 1974:18-23).

As a Malay poet, Muhammad was greatly aware of his intellectual position – an individual who tried to define himself in a post-colonial community that was still rather conservative. In differentiating himself from others of his community, Muhammad related himself to Si Tenggang, the ungrateful son of Malay legends and folk culture, though he was not exactly like that. In an interview in 1979, Muhammad outlined his position as Si Tenggang II within the contemporary Malay culture (Jaafar 1979:25-28). In the interview, after going around the world Tenggang II returned to his homeland with a broader horizon of thought; but he was more inclined to give ideas, rather than to accept. This image of the non-conformist re-evaluating his identity is more apparent in Muhammad's poems.

Like much of his poetry on identity, Muhammad's poems discuss the individual and his repositioning among the others of his own community. Basically, the Self, or the persona in the poem, begins with "feeling" man's existence at the personal level. It begins with personal experience and thought. He exists, and because he exists, he feels, thinks and acts. Ideally, every true individual faces himself or herself and the facts of their lives, and faces it with consciousness, conscience, and intellectual strength. In fact this awareness informs the individual of his existence at any point in time. Therefore, in Muhammad's poetry, consciousness is the primary source of knowledge of the self and of the world around him. In the poem, "ke pusat" (to the centre), for example, the persona says:

*ke manapun aku pergi  
samudera bergelombang di kesedaranku  
atau membentangkan langitnya  
di mata ingatan.*

(wherever I go  
sea waves roll in my consciousness

or spread out its skies  
in the memory's eyes.)

(*Dari Seberang Diri*, 1982)

In his academic writings, Muhammad uses the term “*rasa*” (feeling) for consciousness. However, his explications suggest that it means more than consciousness. It includes, emotion, intuition, conscience, and sensitivity. According to Muhammad (1977b), “these faculties are put to use along with that of the mind at a moment of thought”. Thus for him, consciousness is related to the mind and thought in equipping the self with the “flow of experience”. The flow of experience is very important, because it is the one and only reliable source that informs the self about its existence and the existence of the world around it. Other sources such as collective ideas and traditional wisdom are outside the self and therefore not automatically acceptable. Muhammad’s voice in this regard is loud and clear, as may be seen in the stanza below from the poem “land of adolescence”:

*keremajaan akan selalu menang  
di negerinya sendiri,  
kerana orang tua tak ada haknya  
di antara tanah lereng ini.  
kerana mereka tidak berpijak  
pada kepejalan dan segi pengalamanmu.*

(adolescence will always prevail  
in its own land,  
because the elderly have no rights  
in between this sloping land  
for they do not tread  
on solidness and from aspects of your experience.)

(*Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*, 1975)

Here the poet rejects the rights of the elderly to determine the way of life of the new generation or individual, because their experience is irrelevant to young people. However, this does not mean that Muhammad completely negates external experiences. On the contrary, his poetry is filled with elements of external experiences which motivate the self. The exception is, this experience is not highly valued, other than as a set of stimuli. The rejection of the elderly or of society and tradition in the above

context, to a certain extent, refers to a rejection of external standards in the life of the self. This is a natural situation, because the self only accepts the consciousness and experience of the self alone as reliable. In other words, in Muhammad's poetry, the individual is free from being regulated by others. Ideally, the self is free to desire and choose. As a responsible subject, the choice is based primarily on the "rasa" or feelings of the self. It cannot be measured according to external criteria, "for they do not tread /on the solidity and from the aspects of your experience." Thus ultimately, each individual is the sovereign subject and chief judge in choosing for the self.

Muhammad accepts the profile of an individual and the matter of his existence as mentioned above, and, through introspection and self-assessment, attempts to make it meaningful. This results in his approach, as several scholars have mentioned, as being intellectual in nature, or as Muhammad himself states, as possessing "academic sensibility". To the poet, the centrality and beauty of this sort of poetry is the sovereignty of the individual or self in his present existence. In this existence, the individual is separated from the masses, and characterized by loneliness and anxiety. However his life has meaning, or ought to have meaning.

Muhammad's conviction is that in the modern sense, ideally, there is no ready-made definition of the self or the individual. That is, the self does not live according to regulations of a community or tradition. On the contrary, the self exists and provides its own definition of itself through experience and choice. In the poem, "pilihan" (choice) Muhammad shows the self's rejection of regulations presented to him:

*aku akan memilih-beza  
di antara pedih hati sekarang  
dan kesepian yang menanti,  
di antara kebagusan yang mungkin  
dan keburukan yang pasti.*

(I shall choose-differentiate  
between the stinging heart of now  
and the loneliness that awaits,  
between possibility of merit  
and certitude of iniquity.)

(*Sajak-sajak Pemandang*, 1973)

The importance given to individual experience compared to collective or traditional wisdom means that in Muhammad's poetry the self is only a potentiality. It can only be realized through free desire. In other words, every individual is yet incomplete; only experience and the freedom of choice makes for completion and purity.

Purely as the self, the modern individual certainly feels dislocated and alienated, and thus burdened with loneliness and anxiety. In Muhammad's poetry the self is constantly suspicious of convention and the ideas of those in authority. Therefore, the relation of the self to the masses is often marked by tension and conflict. In the poem written in English, "Why should not young men be mad?", for example, the persona asks:

Why should not young men be mad?  
thrown into the country of the old  
where age solves no old problems  
and sleepy eyes no longer see  
the newness of the moment?

*(Time and Its People, 1978)*

In another poem, "A taste of history", the persona insists:

To fight is to choose loneliness  
the gathered enemies  
send them  
to the nearest hell.

*(Time and its People, 1978)*

In Muhammad's aesthetics, dislocation or alienation from the community naturally brings a sharp loneliness and anxiety. Loneliness and anxiety are central to Muhammad's intellectual arena because there exists a relation of tension or strain between the self and the community. In the poem "sepi" (loneliness) the poet laments as follows:

*sepi telah membanjir  
hari pudar,  
patahkan lidah bicara  
dan regutkan jenaka.*

(Loneliness has flooded  
a bleak day

breaking the tongue's speech  
and snatching jest.)

(*Sajak-sajak Pendatang*, 1973)

Once again, on the grip of loneliness over the self in the poem “decoud”, the persona whispers:

*kubah biru ini penjara,  
hanya aku penghuni  
pantai suatu akal  
sepi dan panjang.*

(This blue dome is a prison,  
I'm the only dweller  
the shore of a mind  
lonely and lingering.)

(*Sajak-sajak Pendatang*, 1973)

The resulting symptoms of dislocation are not only loneliness, but also anxiety. In Muhammad's poetry anxiety is the opposite of peace. Usually the self is marooned in a condition of anxiety when it experiences loneliness. Anxiety begets other effects as well. As the poet says in the poem “selamat malam, kota indah” (good night, beautiful city):

*selamat malam  
kota indah  
resahku hanya memudahkan  
catmu  
mengelabukan air  
dan melengangkan pasar.*

(Good night  
beautiful city  
my anxiety only blurs  
your colours  
clouds water  
and makes markets deserted.)

(*Dari Seberang Diri*, 1982)



Even though the self experiences dislocation and is threatened by loneliness and anxiety, the poet believes that the self still possesses objective and meaning. In fact, it is more meaningful and dignified in comparison to other selves that are easily controlled by the community and tradition. This is because, by not following the collective wishes, the self has the opportunity to confront life on its own. In this way it can define and realise its own potential.

Even if a majority of Muhammad's poems show his sympathy for the individual and identity, this develops into the central question in the collection, *Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*. In this collection he constructs the image of Si Tenggang, the character of the ungrateful child well-known in Malay folklore. According to the legend, Si Tenggang leaves his impoverished and unsightly parents. After being away all this time, he returns to his kampung, a rich merchant with a ship and beautiful wife. Ashamed of his parents before his wife, Tenggang immediately drives them off his ship. Therefore his mother puts a curse on him and straight away he, along with his ship, is turned to stone.

Like the legendary character, Muhammad's persona as Si Tenggang II too left kampung and country except in his case, he left in quest of knowledge. He returned with experience, knowledge and newly acquired values. Therefore confronted by his community he too has made certain self-assertions. Thus in the opening poem of the collection, "return of si tenggang", the persona declares:

*jarak jasmani yang kutempuh ini  
adalah perjalanan jiwa,  
pemindahan diri dari tanah asal  
ke negeri yang dikumpul oleh mata dan akal.  
ilmu yang datang darinya  
adalah ilmu pendatang  
yang belajar melihat, berfikir  
dan memilih di antara kenyataan  
yang selalu berubah.*

...

*aku adalah kau  
yang dibebaskan dari kampung  
tanah dan kebiasaan  
merdeka kerana aku  
telah menemui diri.*

(spatial distances I cross  
are journeys of the soul  
relocating the self from homeland  
to lands mustered aggregated through eye and mind.  
the knowledge from this  
is the knowledge of the migrant  
who learns to see, think  
and select from facts  
that are always shifting.

...

I am you  
freed from *kampung*  
from land and familiarity  
free because I  
have found myself)

(*Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*, 1975)

However in comparison to the actions of the original Si Tenggang, the attitude of Si Tenggang II is greatly different. He does not entirely reject his community and their tradition. In fact, he comes home to stay and share with them the knowledge, experience and new values acquired from his travels. Consequently he admits:

*lihat, aku seperti kau juga,  
masih melayu  
sensitif pada apa  
yang kupercayai baik,  
dan lebih sedia memahami  
dari adik atau abangku.  
dan muatan kapal ini juga untukmu  
kerana aku pulang.*

(look, I am just like you,  
still a malay  
sensitive to what  
I believe is good,  
and more willing to understand  
from my older and younger brothers.  
and the contents this ship are for you too  
for I have returned.)

(*Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II*, 1975)

What this means is that although he has changed, that is, possesses the worldview, knowledge and values that are new, he still wishes to associate himself with his community, and wishes to give back to them.

Certainly the return of Si Tenggang II is marked by elements of anxiety and tension. This can be observed from several contradictory statements on the status of his self among his community. For instance, in one line he states, "I have brought home my self" but in another says, "I have not fully returned, I know." Thus it is natural for the reader to have a question: is Si Tenggang II confused? However observation of his answer reveals otherwise. In reality, Si Tenggang II is aware that he has not completely returned, because he is not like before. At the same time, not radically new either, and because of that he still can associate himself with his community. In an interview with this author in Leiden, Holland, Muhammad clarified a significant difference between the original Si Tenggang and Si Tenggang II. He said the original Si Tenggang was merely a merchant, whereas the Si Tenggang of his poetry is a scholar who is interested in diverse civilizations and their traditions. In fact, Si Tenggang II is an intellectual who is well-versed in foreign knowledge and cultures, but is very keen to contribute to his own race. His dilemma is how to find the balance, that is, to obtain the best from his own self and community, the traditions of his own race, and foreign cultures (Md. Salleh Yaapar, 2003:16).

Reading Muhammad's poetry in the postcolonial context, the reader can appreciate the difficulties and wisdom involved in negotiating between the wish of the individual and demands of the community. It appears that Si Tenggang II resolves his problem by defining himself as someone who defends individuality while remaining firmly within his community. He possesses critical and progressive views, and has become very different. Yet essentially he is still a Malay. This is what Muhammad expresses in "pulang" (return), yet another poem from the *Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II* collection:

*pulang ini  
kembali kepada keujudan  
dan perkelilingan  
yang menghidupkan kembali  
persoalan dan masalahnya.*

*tiba di sini  
aku kembali*

*terikat pada nilai-nilai  
dan caracaranya,  
kembali melayu,  
berakar  
bertumbuh  
atau berpecah.*

*pulang ini kembali  
dengan diri  
dan rumah,  
negara dan manusianya.  
pulang ini  
menerima dan  
membesar.*

(this return  
is to the existence  
and settings  
that bring back  
the questions and problems.

Arriving  
I return  
bound to the values  
and the ways  
return a Malay  
rooted  
budding  
or fragmented.

This return  
is to the self  
and home,  
nation and its people.  
this return  
accepts and  
grows.)

*(Buku Perjalanan Si Tenggang II, 1975)*

Certainly this is the case of a person's struggle for change, but at the same time an acceptance of continuity. Thus, after a passionate search that involves tension and conflict, Si Tenggang eventually finds his identity and expresses it through his community.

## SELF AND OTHER

The preceding discussion presented the issue of quest for identity, particularly how the individual defines himself in his relationship with “the other”. What needs to be discussed subsequently is the identity of the other and the poets perception of them.

There are two groups of “the other” in Muhammad’s post-colonial poems, that is, “the other within” and the “the other without”. The first is the other in the persona’s own community. The second is those who are outside his community. The other within is of two groups. The first is the larger group to which, although traditional and conservative, the persona wishes to return and contribute. In positioning himself among them eventually he is able to define his own identity. The second is those whom he calls “the mob that hides its face” (*Rowing Down Two Rivers*). These are the people within the community who are greedy and opportunistic, prepared to do anything to achieve fortune, position, property, status and title.

These people may have new worldviews, but do not possess the self-respect and courage to speak the truth. Thus it is natural for the persona to view such people with disdain and disgust. In a poem entitled “for kasturi,” Muhammad differentiates the persona, that is himself, from the other within as follows:

You come in the season of mourning,  
the sad harvest has just been gathered  
from a decade of passion  
but all farmers know  
that self-respect or respect of belief  
must be winnowed from time and patience.

You will know too  
in this riotous bazaar  
the man of self-respect who will not sell  
is always alone,  
but for him sleep is always sound.

Nothing is easy, my son,  
but from among us  
there are some who choose pride.  
you will perhaps not believe that  
there is a price for all beliefs.

in the quiet lanes  
you will see  
some auctioning them.

*(Rowing Down Two Rivers, 2000)*

Beyond differentiating, the self is also fortified against being drawn along by the current of the other within as follows:

The time that you made for your friends  
often returns to drown you in your own home  
but you will still grow with its suffering  
learn to be brave  
before the mob that hides its face.

Welcome, my son  
I need you  
in this season of floods  
that there may be another  
who will fortify this house of beliefs  
dare to speak the soul's words  
and live with them.

*(Rowing Down Two Rivers, 2000)*

Next, it is about “the other without”. This refers to those outside the community of the persona and his homeland. Generally, this is the group that has caused the persona to develop himself to the extent that eventually he returns to search for the roots of his tradition and identity. These are generally people from the West or agents of Western culture, even though this is not made explicit. Basically, it is the encounter with them that transforms the worldview and attitude of the persona. The knowledge that is offered to his people when he returns too is a product of those travels and encounters. Reflecting on this aspect of himself, the persona, and from his own position as a postcolonial poet, insist that he is very “...proud of his roots, but proud too that he has been part of the bigger world” (Md. Salleh Yaapar, 2003:16).

Muhammad appreciates the West and its people, although he is also very critical of them. Much of this is due to the painful colonial experience of his people. It is obvious that he cannot forget the span and the cruelty of the colonial period, during which his people were enslaved and his civilization

belittled by Westerners. In “ceretera yang ketiga puluh empat” (thirty-fourth tale) a poem from the *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu* collection, Muhammad reminisces the fall of the Melaka Sultanate to the hands of the Portugese in 1511. He blames the decadance of Malay feudal leadership for the calamity. At the same time, he denounces European forces of conquest, referring to them as *feringgi biadab* (uncivilized foreigners).

Compared to the Portugese, Muhammad is even more critical of the British colonisers of his nation from the 19th to the mid-20th centuries. For him, the British colonial policy was responsible for marginalizing the Malay language and obstructing the Malay civilization (Md. Salleh Yaapar, 2003:16). The Malay language was only used as the medium of instruction in primary schools. At the secondary level, English reigned supreme. Consequently for a long time the Malay language and literature saw no development as it ought to have. Muhammad made a political statement when he stopped writing poetry in English, and focussing on writing only in Malay. In this context it may be said that Muhammad “writes back to the Empire” by not writing poetry in the hegemonic English language.

Besides poetry on the subject of his homeland, Muhammad also published poems which were commentaries on post-imperial Britain, the nation that helped to enriching his intellectual and literary growth. A good example of this is “england in the spring”, which is part of the collection, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*. The poem portrays the perimeter of English towns, including that of London, Birmingham and Oxford, in the spring. As may be seen below, his focus is not on gardens and flowers, but on the hustle and bustle in dirty lanes filled with migrants from former British colonies.

i

The arctic winds howl through the crotch of march  
wildly sweeping the night’s litter.  
newspapers with faded truth  
plastic containers unmanaged by civilization  
let the city’s dust and sin  
settle over the street’s gravel and ancient drains.  
time has lost its sun.

I come to north London  
passing by cold chaotic indian sundry shops  
that sit precariously on the edge of finchley,  
a bright japanese mini-market  
is made up by the advertisements’ moods.

....

ii

In the dim lanes  
I meet a stranger from a continent  
built by the sun,  
history and need brought him here,  
making him a sceptical british.  
the shops and the bright saris  
are reminders of a past century

...

now on the lanes of the municipal houses,  
a caribbean boy falls in love with a punk girl,  
a welsh is hugging a punjabi woman.  
all make love in cockney.

Greek children queue up  
for the oily Chinese fried rice.  
in the restaurant the father steals a meat  
from his shrinking souvlaki.  
northern Indian tandoori perfumes a whole street,  
merging into the odour of fish 'n' chips.  
promptly he curses the smell of spices.

*(Rowing Down Two Rivers, 2000)*

While Muhammad appears to tell the story of the lives of migrants he meets in the lanes mentioned, he is in fact making a subtle political commentary about the British and their history of colonization. He mentions that the British are still repaying a debt by shouldering the burden of their sin upon races that they colonized before. The poem ends with the following lines:

The grey eyes of the English stare  
upon the fog and history's break-point,  
they have learnt to be angry or accepting  
that history must be paid with history,  
sins collected  
in a hundred islands and states,  
must be expiated in the centre of London,  
in the dirty mills of Birmingham  
or the newstands of Oxford.

*(Rowing Down Two Rivers, 2000)*



In another poem, “Standing in Oxford Street,” Muhammad deliberates more explicitly on the mistakes and past sins of the British. This poem too is from *Rowing Down Two Rivers* in the section entitled “this too is my world”. In the poem, standing at the famed Oxford Street as he gazes far into the distance, the persona asks:

How shall we sentence  
this shopkeeping race  
that has sold the land and lodge  
of a part of humanity  
for these grand buildings here?  
how shall we taste  
its riches  
built from the blood  
of the black, red, brown and yellow peoples,  
and on the deception of innocent races and their countries?  
how shall we greet the pedestrians  
if their ancestors have poisoned  
the maori for their land  
slaughtered peoples of the world’s valleys  
confusing races?

(*Rowing Down Two Rivers*, 2000)

In the poem, Muhammad lists the sins of the British throughout history with facility. Yet he appears to find it difficult to pass judgment on the present generation and situation. Perhaps it is because Britain has nurtured him intellectually, and consequently he considers the nation as a part of his world.

“Standing in Oxford Street” speaks not only of the English, but of tourists from previously colonized lands, perhaps even from Muhammad’s own land. For the persona, usually these people lack a socio-political memory. Therefore, they are foolish in their adulation of the English, and in fact copy and imitate those are not as great as they once were.

Standing here in Oxford Street  
I stand witness to  
tourists from the colonies  
worshipping the English  
who humiliated them for a hundred years  
walk with their gait  
think with their syllogism  
live with their values.

Standing in Oxford Street  
I imagine  
the collapse of their imitators  
fallen under  
the arrogant  
dying giant.

(*Rowing Down Two Rivers*, 2000)

Apart from their past wrongs-doings, Muhammad is apparently uneasy about the attitude of the whites of contemporary Britain, and generally the West, towards non-whites. On the whole he feels their superiority complex and scorn for others. In fact, his attitude appears to extend to inanimate objects that are related to white people. There is, possibly here, an element of stereotyping by the poet.

In the poem, "Defiance" from the collection *Time and its People*, Muhammad portrays a dusky persona against a Western setting. This persona is obliged to face an environment that is unfriendly towards non-whites. This includes the snowmen which seem to be turning their faces away from him. In a context of apparent confrontation, the persona naturally takes a tenacious stand. The following lines clearly illustrate the situation and attitude of the persona in such an environment:

I defy you, autumn,  
with my tropical blood,  
dissolve flakes with my breath  
before they melt on my face.

I defy you, November cold,  
that colonises my skin,  
that stops my steps,  
with the dance of my islands.

I defy you, snowmen,  
who look away from my brownness,  
with the sun in my hand  
and life in my limbs.

(*Time and its People*, 1978)

## SUSTAINING THE LITERARY HERITAGE

Finding his identify and rejecting the colonizer alone are not enough. Equally important is the effort to nourish and sustain the treasury of his heritage. For this purpose Muhammad Haji Salleh has made several efforts which are evidently successful. Firstly, as a poet, he has beautifully expressed afresh, in the form of poetry, several events or stories from *Sulalat al-Salatin* (*The Malay Annals*), a work of prose by the great scholar and writer, Tun Sri Lanang. This has yielded the collection, *Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu* (Poems from The Malay Annals) (1992) in which he authored 34 tales from the classic. The substance and significance of the last poem from the collection, “Ceretera yang Ketiga Puluh Empat” (Thirty-fourth Tale), has been touched on before. Of special relevance here are several lines from the first poem in the collection, that is “Mukadimah” (preface):

Aged chief, treasurer Tun Mamat  
fashion our history, o master,  
history of the Malays and all their islands,  
take me back to the lofty peak of Siguntang,  
to the seas across,  
Java in the southeast, the Bugis riding the waves,  
to the people in paddy-fields, jungles and sands.

The master, great scholar and writer,  
his work is heavy, must be safeguarded,  
language and chronology of events,  
greatness of nation and human conscience,  
yet greatest of all,  
speak of the truth,  
for truth is the material of history  
corrector of kings reminder of the forgetful  
guide of the truthful  
and unbroken by blows.

(mamak bendahara Tun Mamat  
perbuatlah tuan hamba sejarah kita,  
sejarah Melayu dan seluruh pulau-pulaunya,  
Bawalah beta kembali ke Siguntang yang tinggi,  
ke samudera di seberang,  
Jawa di tenggara, Bugis diperahu laut,  
kepada rakyat di sawah, hutan dan pasir.

tuan hamba ialah pujangga,  
 tugasnya berat, semuanya mesti dijaga,  
 bahasa dan urutan peristiwa,  
 kebesaran negeri dan hati kecil manusia,  
 tapi yang amat agung,  
 perkatakanlah yang benar,  
 kerana kebenaran itu isi sejarah  
 pembetul raja dan pengingat orang lupa,  
 petunjuk yang lurus  
 dan tiada patah di bawah pukulan.)

(*Sajak-sajak Sejarah Melayu*, 1992)

The extract clearly resonates with the king's command to his treasurer who is a great scholar and writer, to produce the work that is now known as *The Malay Annals*. In fact, the message to compose and compile is not limited only to the treasurer. It may be perceived as a trust that Muhammed has engaged in as a great Malay scholar and writer in modern times, the colonial era that is filled with challenges. In fact, this is what Muhammad has done through his poetry.

Besides efforts mentioned above in reviving traditional texts, Muhammad has devoted a great deal of effort and thought to editing and transliterating several classic works from the Jawi to the Roman script. A preliminary fruit of his scholarship is *Syair Tantangan Singapura Abad Kesembilan Belas (Ballad of the Confrontation of Nineteenth Century Singapore)*. This work was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1994. Next are his efforts on the Tun Sri Lanang classic, *Sulalat al-Salatin*. The product of this is *Sulalat al-salatin: Ya'ni Perteturun Segala Raja-raja (Sejarah Melayu) (The Malay Annals: That is the language of kings)*, published jointly by Yayasan Karyawan and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1997. Muhammad's passion for Tun Sri Lanang has never declined. Currently, with support from Universiti Sains Malaysia, he heads a special research programme on the history and heritage of Tun Sri Lanang at Aceh. At the same time, the work of sustaining Malay classics has been endless. Currently Muhammad is putting finishing touches to the editing and transliteration of the manuscript, *Hikayat Isma Yatim (The Epic of Isma Yatim)*, another Malay classic. In addition he has finalised the assembling and editing of a collection of classical Malay pantun from Minangkabau. This work is now in the process of publication by USM Press.

Besides editing and transliterating works, Muhammad has also done a lot of translation, his own works included. This includes translation from Malay into English and vice versa. In this regard, the most noteworthy is his work on the translation of *Hikayat Hang Tuah (The Epic of Hang Tuah)* from Malay into English. The outcome of this effort, which took several years, is *The Epic of Hang Tuah* published by ITBM (Institute for Translation and Books Malaysia), in 2010.

## QUEST FOR A LITERARY POETICS

It is indeed important to sustain the literary heritage of a race. However, for Muhammad, the effort to understand and present a poetics or indigenous theoretical basis for Malay literature itself is important too. This is because without knowledge about its poetics the beauty of traditional Malay works cannot be appreciated, and nor is it possible to create new works rooted in the Malay land and culture. Therefore Muhammad has devoted a great deal of time and attention to this. In fact, he is known as a pioneer in searching for a literary poetics.

The quest for a Malay literary poetics was taken on based on a Malay philosophy of beauty within traditional Malay literature and in consideration of the worldview and the ethos of the Malay Archipelago and its environment. This effort involves a long drawn-out process, starting from reflection on diverse terminology and concepts of traditional Malay literature, including *pantun* and theatrical presentation, to the level of concluding and forwarding a comprehensive literary theory. Muhammad conveyed these through his inaugural professorial lecture, published as *Puitika Sastera Melayu: Suatu Pertimbangan, (Malay Literary Poetics: An Assessment)* by UKM Press in 1989. Subsequently the contents of this book was reformulated in *Puitika Sastera Melayu (Malay literary poetics)* and published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 2000.

In this theoretical work Muhammad unravels and defines fundamental terminology used in Malay texts. He also discusses in a comprehensive manner the relation of the concepts of text, genre, function of works, author, audience and aesthetics according the society and culture of the Malays. These concepts are recovered and clarified from word, line, expression, story, and style of diverse works and from details and minutiae of society in all the nooks and corners of the Malay Archipelago. In the process Muhammad also makes cross-references to Western scholars like Vladimir I. Braginsky on

Islamic Malay literature and Terry Eagleton, Michael Bakhtin and several other theorists involved in current theoretical discourse such as semiotics, post-structuralism and deconstruction.

As a theory of Malay literature, Muhammad's poetics is still new and has not been thoroughly verified and applied specifically to new or modern works which are possibly quite challenging. Therefore the strengths and weaknesses are yet to be ascertained. However, one strength of this poetics is the fact that there is a unity of vision and framework that connects author with audience, text with context. Thus it is fitting that in 2001 this book was announced as the winner of the MASTERA Literary Award. In 2008 the English version was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Prior to that in 2006, several ideas and concepts from *Puitika Sastera Melayu* were also expressed in Muhammad's book, *Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago*, a publication of USM Press.

### **STRUGGLE TO SAFEGUARD THE MOTHER TONGUE**

Muhammad Haji Salleh's love for his mother tongue, the Malay language, was mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Although he obtained an English education and began with publication of his poetry in English, as a laureate and post-colonial intellectual he took a position to stop writing poetry in the language and lavished his attention on the writing of poetry exclusively in Malay. However for academic writing, translation, and international communication he continued to write in English. Adhering to this position was not easy. On one hand, there was a Malay audience who, for their own reasons, were not convinced about the attitude of "Malayness" of his poetry. On the other, several of his companions who wrote in English mocked him as a traitor to the language and literature (Malaysian literature in English) that they had engaged with and fashioned.

For all that he faced, Muhammad continued to be resolved in his attitude and position. For him, English was the language of the former colonials who had created the marginalization of his mother tongue, and the policy on English had resulted in blocking the development of his culture. In the present enthusiasm for globalization or greed for science and technology, the language continues to dominate Malay and the language of other races that have been colonized by the English. From a different viewpoint, for Muhammad, the dominant language does not need his poetic contribution. Rather, what well and truly needs his poetic contribution, and that of other locals, is his own mother tongue, that is, the Malay language. In a forthcoming

essay entitled “One Colonial Language, One Great Tragic Epic” Muhammad emphasises his position and view as follows:

I sleep easier for not being a betrayer of the language of my forefathers, and of the heritage that they have bequeathed me and of which it is my duty to prolong, especially in this millennium when commercial and cultural globalisation engulfs everything and leaves everybody as a poor factory copy of another, without enough real identity and uniqueness.

This essay is to be published in a book entitled *English as Hydra*, edited by Vaughan Rapatahana and Pauline Bunce, a publication by Bilingual Matters, UK.

It is in this context that Muhammad deeply regrets the actions of Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, to prevent the teaching of Science and Mathematics in Malay and replace it with English in 2003. This action gave rise to what is termed as PPSMI (Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris), the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English. This action is seen as potentially having a bad impact not only at primary and secondary school levels, but also at the level of higher education. It will immediately impede the development of Malay as a language of knowledge. Therefore Muhammad and colleagues wrote a letter of protest to the successive Prime Minister and to the Minister of Education of the time. Subsequently, on 5 May 2009 he wrote a statement for newspaper circulation, on behalf of his associates, the National Literary Laureates. In addition, several days prior to that a letter of complaint-appeal had been sent to His Majesty the King of Malaysia. Besides this, Muhammad held a series of lectures in a personal capacity in and around Kuala Lumpur and the north of the Peninsula to raise people’s awareness of the negative implications of the PPSMI.

Consistent with the view of other intellectuals who were sympathetic, for Muhammad, whatever the policy and action on language and education in the country was, it could not be made independently by politicians, and what is more, in a dictatorial manner. It should rightly be done by hearing the view and advice of language and education experts in advance. On this policy Muhammad subsequently welcomed the position and action of the current Minister of Education who wishes to revert to the teaching of the relevant subjects in Malay, and is very hopeful that his decision will not change.

At Universiti Sains Malaysia, Muhammad used to be the chairman of the Malay Language Trust. The function of this committee is to safeguard the

interests, and foster the development, of the Malay language in administrative matters and in teaching programmes at the university. In view of the current, increasing use of English in institutions of higher learning in the country, the extent of Muhammad's challenges in this task might well be imagined.

## CONCLUSION

I have browsed Muhammad Haji Salleh's creative and works and presented a profile of him as a literary laureate and intellectual in a challenging post-colonial arena. His works evidently show a host of efforts including the poet's search for identity as an individual, the sustaining of the literary heritage, the search for a Malay literary poetics, and the struggle to safeguard the Malay language which is being progressively constrained.

The production of Muhammad's works, and his attitude and position on issues of language, literature and culture are closely connected with the impact of the English education that he received in his youth and the colonial legacy in general. Using the colonial legacy as a springboard Muhammad started on a journey of return to the ambit of his community, searching for the roots of his culture and identity. Through introspection and negotiation, he succeeded in positioning and building his individual identity amid that of his community and tradition. Nevertheless, in the post-colonial arena it is important for a person to become modernized and internationalized. However for Muhammad, to be modern and international it is entirely unnecessary to put away the community, culture, language and identity of oneself. What is necessary is to find a balance. The negotiation in search of a balance to define the self is certainly precarious and painful, as may be seen from the metaphor of Si Tenggang II. In this regard, Muhammad's poetry exhibits how the persona eventually defines himself through engagement with his community. At the same time, the works also display elements of inward conflict or ambivalence.

With regard to "the other" in the arena mentioned, specifically of the West, Muhammad shows his appreciation for having provided him an intellectual orientation. However, these are the very people that colonized his homeland, impeded the development of its civilization, and now continue to dominate his language. Therefore in the same spirit of Si Tenggang II, even though he is obliged to the colonizer's race, Muhammad is also very critical of them.

As an intellectual who loves his tradition, Muhammad has succeeded in nourishing and defining a Malay literary poetics, which was marginalized in colonial times. He is the only Malay scholar to pioneer this very substantial



issue. Muhammad has also served in sustaining the traditional Malay literary heritage through diverse efforts. This includes the collection and publication of classic pantun, editing and transliterating great works like such as *Sulalat al-Salatin*, and giving fresh expression to stories from this work in poetic form. Another significant effort is his translation of the famous epic, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, into English. Through his translation the epic will surely be more widely disseminated and acknowledged at the international literary stage.

On the subject of the Malay language, Muhammad's noticeable contribution and success lies in his courageous choice to write in the language, and not any more in English. Along with his colleagues who love their language, he has also attempted to oppose the PPSMI policy. At this point the implementation of the policy that favours English will be ended, but the real future of the Malay language remains indeterminate.

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