

# A Post-Colonial Poet with a Quest for Identity

## Interview with Malaysian Literary Laureate, Muhammad Haji Salleh

Research >  
Southeast Asia

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.

By Md. Salleh Yaapar

As a post-colonial poet and a professor of literature, Muhammad is known for his passionate quest for identity. He first started writing poetry, in both English and Malay, when he was studying in Britain in the early sixties. Having established himself as a writer, he virtually stopped producing poems in English, and henceforth has exerted his creative energy mainly on writing poetry within the national literary tradition. As a scholar, he also devotes his time to the difficult search for Malay poetics.

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* (1979), *Time and Its People* (1978), *Sajak-sajak dari Sejarah Melayu* (Poems from the Malay Annals, 1981), and *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (2000). To the poet, it is necessary for one within a transitional society to be as open and

international as possible. But, in being open it is important not to abandon one's tradition and lose one's identity. The ideal is to strike a balance. Muhammad's poems reveal that negotiating such a balance in defining oneself and one's roots could be a difficult and painful process.

Muhammad was in Leiden from 1993 to 1995 as the first holder of the European Chair of Malay Studies. Last May he returned to present a paper at the International Seminar on Malay Literature jointly organized by the IIAS and the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Malaysia. During the opening ceremony, Muhammad read a selection of his poems.

In between my chores as seminar convenor, I had an opportunity to interview him at the Faculty Club while he was sipping coffee among friends and catching up with old times.

MSY:

1. The poem 'the circle of the road of return' seems to reflect your fond memories of the campus and your many colleagues, some of whom are here today. Could you describe some of the significant

observations you made and the experiences of your stay and the impact these had on you?

MHS:

I came to Leiden as an academic and as a poet, and was lucky in being able to perform both functions. I transcribed the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Malay Annals), worked on the translations of my poems, and wrote quite a few papers. My fondest memories were both working in the KITLV and university libraries; two of the best libraries in my field. Dutch scholarship in Malay-Indonesian Studies was also dynamic. Interest in new theories was subsequently reflected in their studies and writings on the archipelago. In Leiden I was more theory-conscious, and became more aware of the mode of Malay-Indonesian thought on literature. My book *Puitika Sastera Melayu* (Malay Literary Poetics) partly grew from this consciousness.

MSY:

2. Now, about your poetry. From my reading, the theme of the quest for identity, of defining oneself, seems to be central to your poems both in Malay and in

English. To me, this quest is interesting, but rather problematic. It is difficult to express, and many readers have difficulties in understanding you.

MHS:

Having lived in many countries in Europe and Asia, these countries, their languages and literary cultures, have seeped into my natural desire to get the best out of them. At the same time, having been a foreigner for such a long time, I always had to define myself both as Malaysian as well as a citizen of a bigger world. One does not appreciate one's uniqueness when one lives in the home country. But, when one lives somewhere else, one searches hard for one's identity, difference, as well as possible contribution to the world. It is interesting that I learnt more of Malaysian worldviews and ideas on literature in Europe and other parts of Asia. So to begin with, it was not a simple life that I led, and the person grown 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 epistemology, his sense of beauty and poetics. 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*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I searched out my roots among their pages and words. As you know, I have written a whole volume of poems based on the chapters of *Sulalat al-Salatin*, reworking and reinterpreting passages, characters, and situations. I have also appropriated the metaphor and legend of the prodigal son, Si Tenggang, not only for my own predicament, but, I think, also for those who must face both the new and the old in order to be a modern person. I think my life contains too many settings and scenes, too many countries as backgrounds and starting points, which may present some difficulties to some readers.

MSY:

3. 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, you 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 assertion. To me, the poem reveals some inner conflict.

MHS:

The Tenggang we are dealing with is not the first generation, but the fictional son. This son is partly a traveller like his father. But, he was not a merchant, rather a student, one interested in cultures, in identities, in similarities and differences, and fortunately also in con-

tributing to his homeland. He came back as a person with a broader horizon, no longer fully Malaysian, in the traditional sense. In a way, all of us are Si Tenggang II, for we have come away from the village and have learnt other ways, and are not returning home whole. It is this dilemma of trying to get the best out of the two worlds, and at the same time to remain sane, that is the difficult part he has to negotiate.

Yes, Si Tenggang II is partly me too, as I wrote the poem on my return from the US. In that country, I had to define myself as a Malaysian. On my return I had to define myself again – the new Malaysian who was proud of his roots, but proud too that he has been part of a bigger world. Yes, this poem reflects also, as you say, the inner conflict, or perhaps the difficult mix that is me, the new Malaysian. It may be seen as a poem written in self-defence and self-definition.

MSY:

4. This search for one's roots and the need to define oneself, why are these so important? Has it to do with the colonial experience, or the post-colonial situation, and the fact that Malaysian society is undergoing a rapid change?

MHS:

I think you have put your finger on two of the most important points. Firstly, as a colonized people, we were a conquered people. Our land and ways were looked down upon as inferior. Our language was replaced. Our traditional works were not taught in school, and our civilization put on ice.

It is also quite ironic that I was awakened to feelings of anti-colonialism in Western countries. In these countries, you find a greater freedom to think and act compared to what was granted to us when we were under them. While in Malaysia I was taught that the greatest literature was English, but in England itself, I discovered some other literatures were equally great.

While I was a student in Singapore, my poems were fighting ones, in trying to define the Malayan and the Singaporeans, vis-à-vis the British. It is a shame that before we could even define ourselves this great tsunami of globalization almost swept us all away. What little gain we made we are going to lose in the next generation. Sadly, we have become mere crass, consumers par excellence, more insensitive than the westerners. We have even marginalized our own language and culture to make way for English and popular culture.

MSY:

5. Am I right then in referring to you as a post-colonial poet, one who is intensely engaged in a dialogue with his colonial heritage, and negotiating, so to speak, between the periphery and the centre?

MHS:

Yes, I have always been interested in theories and have written about post-colonialism in Malaysian literature and have come to realize that I was and am quite involved in deconstructing the colonialism within myself, my past. Having reacted quite strongly against the stifling British educational policy, I stopped writing poetry in the English

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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 colo-

## england in the spring

I

the arctic winds howl through the crotch of march  
wildly sweeping the night's litter.  
newspapers with faded truths  
plastic containers unmanaged by civilization  
let the city's dust and sin  
settle over the streets' 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 advertisement's moods.

the wind that chases  
among the dark lanes  
scratches the city's self,  
turns our eyes that we may see ourselves,  
we who always examine with disillusionment.

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,  
a history and times edges  
blending sand and currents,  
flow and move like the oceans,  
dashing limestone cliffs and river mud,  
chaining jamaicans to boats  
bestowing dreams on hong kong coffee shop owners,  
or a quiet exile for ugandan cloth merchants.  
time's ditch rushes in between.

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

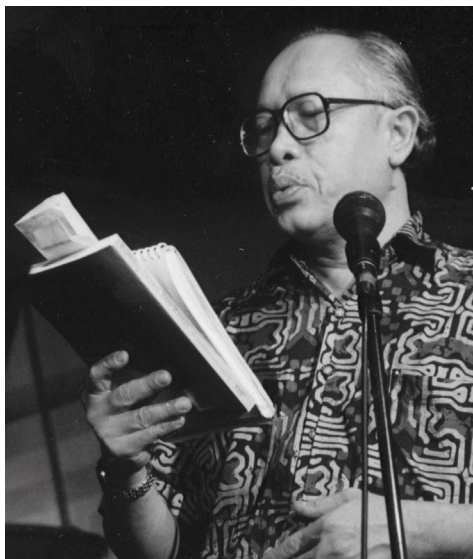
greek children queue up  
for the oily chinese fried rice.  
in the restaurant the father steals meat  
from his shrinking souvlaki.  
northern Indian tandoori perfumes a whole street,  
merging into the odour of fish 'n' chips.  
promptly he curses the smell of spices.

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 island and states,  
must be expiated in the centre of london,  
in the dirty mills of birmingham  
or the news-stands of oxford.

## Biography >

**Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh** (b.1942) studied at the universities of Singapore, of Malaya 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*.

Salleh 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 2001.  
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Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2003

nized 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.

MSY:

6. *You are also known for your dedication to the culture of the Malay world. In fact, there are people who think that your frame of reference is purely Malay, not Malaysian.*<sup>2</sup>

MHS:

As I mentioned earlier, the involvement in Malaysian culture was both a journey of return to my Malaysian roots, and a desire to work in fields that I notice are of great importance but yet not worked on – theory of Malay literature, the pantuns, the great books etc. But, I want to be known as a Malaysian writer rather than just Malay, because though my references are mostly to the Malays, who have been the subject of my study for over 40 years, I also deal with the other ethnic Malaysian groups. Certainly, I plan to write more for

Malaysians as a whole, represent them more, express their unique worlds.

MSY:

7. *Finally, your Rowing Down Two Rivers seems to reflect your identity as a Malaysian poet with a global outlook, and one who has been enriched by both tradition and modernity. Any comments?*

MHS:

This is a selection from my poetic output since 1973. Perhaps reading through these poems one can feel the horizon of the poet. I tend to go in and out of tradition and am inspired by the new language and tone of international writing, of which I feel I am a part. But, the music of old Malay sings within me, influences the sounds I string on paper. I have a feeling that my English is lighter in its emotional content, and grittier in its sounds, but of course less so than the English poet. <

**Prof. Md. Salleh Yaapar** is the current holder of the European Chair of Malay Studies of the IIAS. Prior to this, he was Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Development), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. His area of specialization is Malay and Comparative Literature. His publications include *Mysticism and Poetry: A Hermeneutical Reading of the Poems of Amir Hamzah and Ziarah Ke Timur (Pilgrimage to the Orient)*.  
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## Notes >

- 1 Pantun is a Malay verse form with a rhyme scheme of abab, with the first couplet foreshadowing the meaning contained in the second couplet. There are varieties of pantun, including the six-line pantun and the linked pantun, but the common form is the independent quatrain. The linked pantun has given rise to the Western pantoum, first created by nineteenth-century French poets. Although it has its origins in the Malay pantun, it is a separate genre with separate definition and characteristics.
- 2 Malays form the dominant ethnic group of Malaysia. The term Malaysians, however, designates citizens of Malaysia, thus: Malays, people of Chinese and Indian descents, and others.

## Editors' note >

The full version of the above excerpt of the interview can be found on:  
[www.iias.nl](http://www.iias.nl)

## si 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 learnt to see, think  
and choose between  
the changing realities.

II

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

III

but look,  
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 tardy  
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.

IV

travels made me  
a seeker who does not take  
what is given without sincerity  
or that which demands payments from beliefs.  
the years at sea and coastal states  
have taught me to choose,  
to accept only those tested by comparison,  
or that which matches the words of my ancestors,  
which returns me to my village  
and its perfection.

V

i've learnt  
the ways of the rude  
to hold reality in a new logic,  
debate with hard and loud facts.  
but i too am humble, respecting,  
man and life.

VI

i am not a new man,  
not very different  
from you;  
the people and cities  
of coastal ports  
taught me not to brood  
over a foreign world,  
suffer difficulties  
or fear possibilities.

i am you,  
freed from the village,  
its soils and ways,  
independent, because  
i have found myself.