

The Early Poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh: A Memoir in Tribute

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There is a saying that “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Since learning never ends, perhaps teachers come at different points in our lives according to what we need at the time.

Looking back to the time I was making tentative beginnings in poetry, it was certainly true. The teachers – there were two – who came to lay the critical foundations to my writing appeared without my even being aware of their significance, then. We are talking about the mid-to-late 1960s, when as an undergraduate reading English Literature, two poets came into my life who could not have had a greater impact on my attitude towards what I was studying, and the poetry I was attempting to write.

The Professor who headed the English Department at the time was Dennis J. Enright, a highly distinguished poet in his home country (the UK) and the English-speaking world. He was one of the tutors who took us under his wing, and in the two years of intensive immersion in the subject (as required under the degree structure then) I got to know much more about his poetry and his commitment to not only literature, but to undergraduates struggling with creative writing. He was sharply discerning, but kind; I valued his critical judgement, laconic humour and compassion. Enright returned to England about five years after I graduated. Fortunately, his last few years with the University of Singapore coincided with the time I was a student and graduate tutor and developing an interest in poetry.

The other “teacher” who had an even greater role was a classmate, one in a very tiny class taking the single subject, English Literature. He was Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian, slightly older than the rest of us. He was a trained teacher from the Malay Teachers’ College, Brinsford Lodge, near Wolverhampton, England. His reputation went ahead of him, for we soon heard that he had a substantial portfolio of poems, which even the Chair of English admired. A quiet

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but friendly person, he was not one to let on about his work. It took me a lot of courage to not seem over-curious when I asked to have a look at his poems.

Muhammad's portfolio of poems – so many achieved, complete pieces – totally overwhelmed me. These, from his early writings in English, begun in 1963 in England, were published later, many revised, as the collection *Time and Its People* (Heinemann, 1978).

Just after 1965 when Singapore became an independent nation, those of us on the writing scene (not many, and mostly more senior to me) were faced with the nation's call to forge a Singaporean identity through our literary efforts. After the messy politics and our withdrawal from Malaysia, there seemed to be an even more frantic demand that we create our Singapore identity, our national identity, with any means possible. Literary creations were naturally one of these. It is easy for a nation to tout its poets as nation-building assets without a genuine regard for the art. The whole national effort seemed to me vexatious, and in danger of producing poetry that was disingenuous and unconvincing.

Thus far, with the earlier generation of poets having tried various untenable experiments on both sides of the causeway, attempting to forge a “Malayan” voice using the English language, I found myself totally clueless as to what to do for the so-deemed “national effort.” Not to mention my utter conviction that it was simply not possible to create a literature with a manifest national identity overnight, or even in a few years.

The writing that had been done by the first generation (1950s) of writers sounded stilted, very self-conscious, and ambivalent about what mattered in writing. Ten to fifteen years later, my generation found our imaginations generally locked into a foreign – usually English or European – landscape. This was inevitable as we had been brought up on a diet from the West, and for poetry, a preponderance of writings from the previous centuries up to Pound, Eliot and Yeats, and not further than these. A whole lot of writing from the mid-20th century onwards was little seen in literary curricula, and near to nothing of literatures in Englishes outside of Britain. Africa, the West Indies, India, Australia – these figured hardly at all in our schools and university courses.

The impact of reading Muhammad's poems, even the early ones which later he revised or set aside, preferring to write in Malay exclusively, was a revelation; for it was the first time I was reading something in the English language that spoke movingly about my own home landscape; and creating an experience that was new, authentic and, best of all, natural and unforced. One of his earliest, “A Singapura Sequence” which traced the activities in the island-city through a day, was the first poem I had ever read about city life in Singapore that sounded “at home” with the language and the ambience of the city, with the engaging underpinning of empathy with its dwellers. Muhammad may have changed his mind about his early works; he may have felt they were not “him” and made a conscious choice of allegiances, but there was enough in them, even with my

untrained sensibilities, to recognise as the utterings of a poet's soul, rooted in soil he identified with home.

The ambience of those poems was close to home, not European. It had something to do with the unforced, unselfconscious use of images and metaphors drawn from a Malayan landscape, the judicious use of Malayan names and Malay words. Although I am Chinese, like many Singaporeans I had, and still have, family in Malaysia, and feel perfectly at home there. It was a fortifying breath of fresh home air, to be moving in the landscape of Muhammad's poems. No poet that I had read from Malaya or Singapore seemed to handle the indigenous landscape not only very comfortably but with real familiarity and affection, from kampong life and its attendant sights and sounds, to specific incidentals such as the fragrance of melor. For me it was a revelation of what could be done to "ratify" our own landscape in our creative writing, and I began to understand that a "national" identity could not begin to emerge in one's literature until such ratification of one's country was achieved in the imagination. Which comes first it is hard to say. They do go hand in hand.

Another eye-opening aspect of the writing which I received with a great sense of satisfaction, and which even then settled for me an important conviction about poetry, was the relatively uncluttered, straightforward diction and discourse in the poems. It was *English*, but with a difference. With post-colonial hang-ups about using English in creating our literature, prevailing since the first generation of poets writing in English (Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong, Edwin Thumboo, Goh Poh Seng) here was a way of using it without self-conscious apology or defiance; it was simply (to me, anyway) a cry from the heart in capturing those thoughts the poet needed, to explore his themes.

Lessons in focus and concentration – attention to simple and domestic scenes and objects, such as a school classroom at dismissal time, village life, Malayan flora, beaches and much more – all of these dignified with the genuine poetic embracing of the ordinary, presented a valuable insight which I have grown to appreciate more and more over the years, when I come across more and more persons who avoid poetry and devalue it for being esoteric and ignoring the common man even as writers try to justify its role as a humanising activity.

Many of Muhammad's poems then, as now, seemed to have grown out of the quotidian aspects of life – unexpected incidents, news reports, friendships, things and people observed in his travels. What gave them all an edge, or insights that stayed and provoked further thought, was clearly the morally sensitive mind one could see in the workings of the poems. A very telling incident that convinced me and our classmates, Muhammad's fellow students, happened during a class in Practical Criticism. We were given W.B. Yeats' poem "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?" and told to write a critique of it. All of us did, except Muhammad who took himself off to a corner so as not to be disturbed, and spent the hour crafting what we now have as his remarkable poem "Why

Should Not Young Men be Mad?” Yeats’ angst obviously triggered something in Muhammad’s politically sensitive disposition. The tensions, the questions of a young man deeply critical of his country and its governance, are an index to Muhammad’s preoccupations and sensitivities at the time. We were not much surprised that he had responded to the set task with a poem of his own. By then, he had acquired a reputation for a serious commitment to the worth of literature, which he would not do anything to trivialise.

There was another incident that took place during one of our lectures; it further raised our respect for Muhammad, whom we were convinced was the one among us most likely to fulfil his passionate commitment to a literary vocation.

In our final year, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited the English Department. We knew it was something in the nature of an inspection, to gauge how the country’s citizens were behaving. We were in the middle of a class, in a small room in the English Department, not in a lecture hall. All the men were asked to stand up. One by one they were asked point-blank what they wanted to do after graduation. The atmosphere was tense. It was commonplace for PM to make some critical remark if the answer was not to his expectation. When it came to Muhammad’s turn, he said simply and clearly “I want to be a writer.” We could see PM was momentarily taken aback, but he then remained impassive; the other men had all given “respectable” answers (teacher, administrator). PM made no comment. There was a feeling of dismissal; a mixture of pity and relief! The impression he gave was that you wouldn’t find a Singaporean giving such an answer! But we all were delighted and proud that Muhammad had stood up for the truth for himself, and we believed that he would achieve his goal. History has more than proved us right.

When you are discovering the joy of writing, the guidance of writers you value and have rapport with is of incalculable worth. There was one more important thing I learnt from my earliest writer-mentors. My most treasured mentors have been artists whose greatest impact on me was their humility and regard for the art – not for *their* art but for what I saw as their abiding conviction of poetry’s value, for its role in human expression. Over time, I have been able to discern more clearly that an essential part of the writer’s vocation goes beyond words and the skill of the literary craft. It is a way of living within the creative life of language itself that makes one constantly aware of being within something larger, something more numinous, than what one is. It is fundamental, and goes beyond cultural or national identity; it is an aspect of human identity itself. Today it is even clearer to me that, wherever you are as a writer, it is never about you the writer, but about the art that you bring into the world. The more mature you feel your writing has become, the more you should stay in the background and let your writing speak.

Looking at Muhammad’s prodigious achievements today, it is a great blessing that something of his quiet convictions about literature, and his humility

– evident when we were classmates, as much as today – were a formative influence when I was learning to love literature and to write it. He was never one to push his work at you; but it was immediately clear he was communicating so much that was good to know about human life and human beings the moment you entered into his poetry. One of the long-standing struggles I have had, is an underlying guilt that poetry cannot undo or rectify the ills of the world. The needs of a suffering world, of suffering mankind, are so urgent and unrelieved, they present a constant battering of the conscience when poetry seems at times so irrelevant. It is indeed fortunate that there are writers whose quiet and unwavering pursuit of the art proves a point by showing that it helps to maintain the order and sanity of the artist himself, a personal responsibility.

It is fifty years since the two poets helped me experience important breakthroughs in finding my voice as a writer, and a Singaporean one, though the latter is not for me but my readers to say. There have been good years and lean years, and hard lessons, as I've grown to understand more and more of what vocation means. But the foundations laid down then have not been dislodged. Indeed, they have provided the stability of truth, upon which much else can build. I count myself extremely blessed to have had two of the best writers and human beings share their work with me, at just the right time.