

Salleh ben Joned, *The Amok of Mat Solo*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2011. 112 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-32-5.

The Amok of Mat Solo is Salleh ben Joned's extension of "The Ballad of Mat Solo," a poem first published in 1987 in a collection of poems entitled *Poems Sacred and Profane*, and later republished in 2002. The writer truly lives up to his character – he pushes the parameters of acceptability. Salleh had once said in one of his essays, "if self-censorship is bad for the general intellectual development of a country, it's worse for the development of its literature" (*As I Please* 52). Hence, Salleh abandons all social niceties; he scathingly portrays Malay kampung folks as people having very low mental capacity, Malay politicians and academics as pretentious, affected, conceited and hollow, and the worst kind of bumigeoise (Malay bourgeoisie), the women, as having "Pyrex mentality." The language of the play is earthy with generous amount of profanities to highlight the unstable mind of the protagonist, Dr Muhammad Awang bin Hitam, also known as the tragic Mat Solo. *The Amok of Mat Solo* is a dark play about a disenfranchised Malay academic who becomes increasingly alienated from his family members, his colleagues and his community. The closure is not a pretty sight; after killing his own wife and other people, Mat Solo is shot by the law enforcers.

The play is recreated from the poem "The Ballad of Mat Solo" where Salleh describes the tragedy of Mat Solo, a Malay man driven to his death because of mental depression. In this poem, we see a man trapped in modernity and a psychological limbo as he stands "on the dizzy height of a monstrous power pylon" (*Sajak sajak Saleh* 24) flicking his burning Lucky cigarette into the air, and at tradition, as he thrusts his kris into an innocent bystander. Mat Solo perceives himself a victim whose manhood has been affronted, and he reacts in the common tradition of Malays pushed to react in the frenzy of the liver – he runs amok. In the play, Salleh foregrounds various forces which push Mat Solo's unstable mind to collapse completely. Mat Solo, the highly educated academic, has been dismissed from the university whose environment he finds stifling. He also loathes simple-minded kampung folks, although they respect him as a "Master Propeser" from "Ko Lumpo."

By naming these simple rustic people "Mat Hempap," "Mat Lebih," "Mat Tahu" and "Mat Lekat," Salleh returns to elements of the Morality plays, Medieval European verse drama in which the characters' names personify their moral qualities. "Mat Hempap" and his group of friends seem to be easily duped by city dwellers. By making them speak in *Manglish*, "Mat lebih right, Propeser. You bery educated, but dat don mean you can play with holy words" (22), Salleh pokes fun at their artless existence.

Salleh's appropriation of the name "Tuah" highlights the degradation of Malay heroes. Hang Tuah is synonymous with loyalty of a Malay subject to his king. But Salleh's educated Malay characters such as Datok Seri Muhammad Tuah and Prof Dr Takdir Al-Atas are perceived as bumigeoise men who have sold their souls for material wealth. Indeed, *The Amok of Mat Solo* highlights the artificiality of the Malay bumigeoise community which "lives the Pepsi way" and yet is caught by the need to be more disciplined, more progressive and more extreme in its religious beliefs.

Despite Salleh's troubled perception of problems in the Malay community, his sympathetic construction of Mat Solo as one who can see the flaws in himself and others around him is questionable. Mat Solo's relationships with women – his English female companion, his student, Rina, and his wife – show him to be a man whose mind is constantly focused on sexual matters. I am mostly disturbed by his relationship with his wife which teeters on disintegration – he loathes her "pyrex brains," while she remains utterly ignorant of his philosophical mind. Mat Solo seems unable to contain his anger when his wife pokes fun at his manhood. He abuses her mentally and physically, which culminates in the wife's death when he stabs her with his kris. The fact that both his girlfriend and wife remain unnamed and the Malay factory women are described derogatorily as "Minah Karan," show that Mat Solo is a man who does not think much of anybody but himself. Unsurprisingly, a disillusioned man like Mat Solo has no place in the community, and so he dies a painful death. A self-centred person, he seems to be obsessed with the flaws of other people but never sees his own failings.

Works Cited

- Salleh ben Joned. *As I Please: Selected Writings 1975-1994*. London: Skoob Books, 1994.
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