

Salleh ben Joned. *Adam's Dream*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2007. 127pp. ISBN: 978-983-3221-16-5.

While concluding his Preface to *Adam's Dream*, Salleh Ben Joned mischievously wrote, "I hope my *Adam's Dream* won't become their nightmare." He said this as a response to the reactions from the Malay literary community to his first collection of poetry, *Sajak-Sajak Salleh*, which came out in 1987. His awareness that *Adam's Dream* is even more controversial than his previous collection is evident from the poems themselves. However, in spite of his detached and defiant attitude towards life, this latest volume is a major contribution to Malaysian literature in English, and perhaps his best collection to date. Recollecting Lat's enduring statement on Salleh, it appears that this modern Hang Jebat has finally refined the art of *amok* and turned it into a vocation.

Many references, commentaries and controversies have contributed to Salleh's larger-than-life image in the local literary scene. There are those oft quoted statements from late Usman Awang, A. Samad Said, Adibah Amin and Lat which have institutionalised the *enfant terrible* image of the poet. Ever since his bilingual *Sajak-Sajak Salleh* created a stir in the Malaysian literary world, his perception as a rebellious word-smith has grown. Now, twenty-one years after the publication of his first collection, *Adam's Dream* has certainly reaffirmed that perception. What makes Salleh such a riveting poet is his capability to rebel and yet have the full capacity to defend his ideas with substantive information. Though his poems may seem vulgar to the ordinary reader, his deliberately reckless choice of words and other devices add to the sensuousness and honesty of his work.

Adam's Dream features fifty poems in five sections: "Adam's Dream," "Family Fables," "In Memoriam," "An Offering of Pantuns" and "Verses Various Vicious" – each addressing various issues in the poet's distinctive style. The volume also includes three previously published poems from *Sajak-Sajak Salleh* which, according to the poet, had to be reprinted because of different printing and typographical errors in the past. These poems are "testament in engmalchin" (formerly known as "Malchin Testament"), the haunting "Spirit of the Keris" and "five star poetry." In the volume's first section, i.e. "Adam's Dream," Salleh prods and plays with the issue of religion and its impact on Malaysian society, history and politics. Many of his comments on the subject are likely to incite and provoke the faint hearted. However, such audacity is expected from a poet who has already been accused of heresy, blasphemy and apostasy by several quarters.

The poems in the second section, "Family Fables," highlight a more personal side of Salleh as a husband and father. Although famous for his carefree disposition, the poems reveal a softer side of the poet, especially in relation to his children. This

comes as a surprise to those who are more used to his acerbic and saucy remarks on local politics and religious practices. However, if one remembers the quiet elegance of the poem "Ria" in *Sajak-Sajak Salleh*, then there is nothing surprising about this other side of the poet that we encounter in this section.

"In Memoriam" serves as a platform for Salleh to address those who have shaped and influenced his life. Many of the poems in this section stand out as his best work: "Down Under," "Lucky Poet," "In Memoriam Mr. Ee Tiang Hong" and "Ana al Haq." These carefully crafted poems are bereft of his customary humour and sarcasm, but contain sentiments and linguistic elegance that are appropriate for those the poet admires.

The section entitled "Verses Vicariously Vicious" demonstrates the poet's acknowledged talent. The use of wit and humour in criticising the sensitive social and political issues in the country shows his mastery in the poetic form. The powerfully sarcastic poem, "In Praise of Kemunting," is an apt example of how humour empowers Salleh's poetry and why he considers humour as an important element of sensible living:

What the hell am I talking about?
 Just think, man! Use your mind *lah!*
 And your imagination too, of course.
 You'd need both if you want to turn
 A place for the damned
 Into something more than just bearable.
 Your mind and imagination – plus
 A sense of humour. (121-22)

Despite the overall suave and silky quality of the poems in the book, "An Offering of Pantuns" seems rather awkward and out of place. Compared to his prowess in the use of various poetic devices in the rest of the book, Salleh's attempt to write the traditional "pantun" in a different language seems lackluster. There are several possible reasons for this, including the sophistication of Bahasa Melayu which perhaps could not be attained in another language. Why didn't the poet write the collection of "pantun" in Malay, a language capable of bringing him closer to his culture? In his Preface, Salleh explains why he chose to write in English rather than attempting a bilingual volume. He was utterly disappointed by the cynical responses from the Malay literary coterie to his first collection which contained two-thirds of the poems in Malay. Salleh maintains:

My satires in Malay... seem to have been taken wrongly by most of the Malay readers. This is one of the reasons why I have the distinction of being called a racial-cultural apostate as well as a religious one. (8)

The book concludes with the poem “a hymn to the durian,” which leaves a bitter taste in the mouth long after one finishes reading the book. It doesn’t attempt to be philosophical, motivational or inspirational. Instead, the concluding poem is short, precise, piercing and almost scalding:

what did you say?
it’s mind over matter?
no lah! This is
a proof of matter over
mind, you twit!
And it is an experience
that really matters.

In a society where things are often taken too seriously or blown out of proportion, Salleh ben Joned brings comic relief but also keeps it real. He does not expect people to love or hate his poems, but to experience them for all they are worth and to consider the readers’ responses to his poems as a reflection of who they are. Most importantly, Salleh reminds us all that life is temporary, and there is nothing wrong in having a little bit of fun while we still can.

Nur Sheena Baharudin
International Islamic University Malaysia

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