The World is My Bookshop: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh

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Photo credit: Umi Amalin Zafirah

Muhammad Haji Salleh (b. 1942) is part of that generation of Malayan and Malaysian writers who found their voice in the 1950s and 1960s as a new nation began to take shape. English was the preferred medium in which he wrote in those early days, having been exposed to the major works of English literature in school and, later, as a student in the Malayan Teachers' College, Wolverhampton, England. As is the case with many students and scholars doing English literature in the postcolonial age, he found himself drawn, eventually, towards his mother tongue – Malay – and the literature of that language. In a country that is still struggling to define what Malaysian literature is,[2] and where

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[2] The official position is that all literary works written in Malay, the national language, can be considered Malaysian literature, while those in other languages, e.g. Tamil, English, Iban, are deemed "sectional literatures," implying a minority status.

language is often politicised, he is one of the few Malaysian writers who are adept at writing poetry in the two contesting languages, Malay and English.

Muhammad Haji Salleh's career as a poet, teacher and literary critic spans decades. He regards himself first and foremost as a poet of nature, buoyed by childhood memories of the green landscape of Sungai Aceh, Penang where he grew up. Yet many of his poems also address social problems – how globalisation gave birth to selfish, brand-conscious Malaysians, for instance – and satirise the pretentiousness and follies of politicians (both actual and aspiring). In "si tenggang's homecoming," a set text for students taking English in secondary school several years ago, Muhammad inverts the archetypal figure of the prodigal son to underscore how travel broadens the mind and enriches one's identity.

His profession as poet and scholar has taken him to many parts of the world, as academic fellow (North Carolina, Michigan and Berkeley in the USA), chair of Malay studies and poet-in-residence at the University of Leiden, and Kyoto University's Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (Quayum). Professor Muhammad is also the recipient of several prestigious literary awards in the region, among them the ASEAN Literary Award for Poetry (1977) and the SEA Write Award (1997); in 1991, he was appointed Malaysia's National Laureate (Quayum).

In retirement, Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh remains a busy person. His English translation of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the 17th-century epic of the Malay hero – a labour that took him some fifteen years to complete – was published in 2010. At the time of this interview, he had just completed a translation of Henri Fauconnier's classic novel, *Malaisie* or *Soul of Malaya*, into Malay. He continues to give public talks on language, literature and culture at the invitation of universities, think-tanks and cultural organisations. A number of his essays and literary reviews are also waiting in line to be published – he describes the amount of work he has to do as *berlapis-lapis* – literally, overlapping, one after the other.

This interview took place at Prof. Muhammad's home on a warm afternoon in August 2014. It began with him showing us how to use an online concordance of the Malay language, the Malay Concordance Project, begun by the late Ian Proudfoot – and marvelling at the wonders of online search engines, both of which have helped him tremendously in his research. We talked about books, the perils of reading poetry in Malaysia, cultural poverty in the country and the repercussions of language policies, among others.

Can you tell us about your latest publications, whether it's your creative writing or your academic writings?

I've got something new – *Jatuh ke Laut menjadi Pulau*. This just came out three to four months ago, my collected poems. Three volumes, all of my poems, except the most recent ones. I couldn't include the latest ones, because they have just been published. A history of my life is also included in this book.

Are the poems arranged in chronological order?

The most recent poems are in the first volume, and the earliest ones are in the third volume, so from 2000 down to the 1960s, the poems are arranged in a reverse chronology.

Are all the poems in Malay? Or are some in English as well?

All the poems are in Malay. My poems are mostly in Malay now. I'm currently working on a book of about 500 pages of my selected poems, including the latest ones; but you know, you keep doing work for other people; your own work takes a backseat. In press is a book on the *pantun*, a book in Malay. It should be out soon. Two more are with Dewan Bahasa, awaiting publication. I write two columns every month, one for *Dewan Budaya* and the other for *Dewan Sastera*; I have written a few hundred of each so far. I've got somebody to arrange the articles, one for a travelogue and the other for literary reviews and pieces of international literature. So that should be out not too long from now, I think. Both of them [the books] are between 400 to 500 pages each. My selected poems are about 500 pages too. And I have a book of English essays and a book of Malay essays coming out, so all are in the works.

What books or authors have you read recently? Are there any that you particularly enjoy?

I'm translating *Soul of Malaya* by Henri Fauconnier. It's almost ready. I think that's one of the better books on the Malaysian mind, the Malaysian soul. A story from Vietnam, *Dumb Luck* – the author lampooned the aristocrats in the 1930s. In fact, I don't read British literature; the British are not good writers anymore. But the [migrant] Indian British [writers], they're very good. I used to read a lot of Salman Rushdie; I thought he was brilliant – his views on religion aside. Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, I read it, but I didn't read *My Name is Red*. I never could finish it. I reviewed Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*. So the books I read come from different countries.

This is the book I'm about to publish – *Sastera: Sebuah Bicara dan Aksara*, essays on world literature. These are what I have written about – many on

Indonesian literature, on H.B. Yassin, Rendra, Subagio Sastrowardoyo, *pantun* Melayu, Amir Hamzah, Sunthorn Phu. In my book *Dunia ialah Sebuah Kedai Buku* [*The World is a Bookshop*], there are articles on *Behind the Red Mist* by Ho Anh Thai; Vu Trong Phung's *Dumb Luck*; Salma, a Tamil Muslim writer, from Tamil Nadu; Natsumi Soseki; *Genji Monogatari*; *Please Look after Mom* by South Korean writer Kyung-Sook Shin; Latin America – Octavio Paz, Marquez; Auden; Doris Lessing; Soyinka. These are what I have been reading, more or less, as much as I can. Besides, it's fun to read them. It's not just the white writers who are good at writing.

You were appointed a National Laureate in 1991. Did being a National Laureate make you feel that you had certain responsibilities to the nation?

Here's a good story: a friend of mine, a schoolmate from when I was in Form Two or Form Three said, "Eh, I heard that you're a… National something?" So I replied, "The National Bank? The National Zoo?" These titles are all just accessories. But if a writer is serious about his or her role, the title serves a function, doesn't it? You think you can say things that you should say, that others are not saying, and you have a certain point of view that other people don't have. Writers think they have sharper eyes and sharper words to describe this world that other people have not written about. And I have been feeling for a long time that I have been pushed, dragged or whatever, to say things, because I read a lot, I've been in many countries from which I get special experiences that I can say to others. I try to read as widely as possible, and I think all these literatures are my literature too, besides Malay literature. And they think my literature is theirs too. And once in a while my poems get published overseas, so we share these things.

I don't want to feel that I'm very special. These are certain things that push you up, and after some time, you notice that people like your way of describing things, people like your language, for example. So you develop this for yourself and perhaps for others. There's no grandstanding in my case, and I'm not a good reader of poems. I do it quietly. I do it in Europe and America where thirty or forty people gather in a room and I read my poems, talk and discuss with them. Here I can't. I can't shout, I can't jump – if I jump I'd fall and that's not good for Malaysian literature.

Why not here? Is it something to do with the culture?

Here it's not literature that's important, it's the festival atmosphere. So when there is a gathering, about thirty writers will be asked to read poems. My poems are very quiet. You think on the inside, you have a journey inside me or inside my ideas. My concept is not "shouting poetry" or what they call declamation. It

is a journey of thought, of language, of music. But you'll be shouting your poems, you can't listen to the quiet tones. Great music is quiet music, and great ideas too, are quiet. So I feel depressed when I get invited to read. Before I warm up, it's already gone. And these people are looking for those who shout the loudest, and do stunts. I'm a poet, I'm not an acrobat; or a politician, who shouts their lies. I don't do that. We should not have too many poets reading at the same time, but have a special session for every poet. And I'd feel more satisfied, I'd feel that I presented as much as I can, and I get a good reception when I do this type of reading. But when I read a single poem in a gathering of many poets, I don't feel satisfied.

I was in India, and I read about three or four poems; I had a good audience who listened. Once when I was in Bonn, in Germany, the moderator took twenty minutes to introduce me. He seemed to know everything about me, even what happened three months ago. He mentioned what I was involved in, what I was doing. They are so appreciative. And this also happens in Japan. Here they will say, "This is the famous Professor Muhammad who needs no introduction." There you go, anything will do. Things are done without a sense of care or seriousness. This is a sad thing. I think literature is important and my work contributes a little to that importance.

I'm a little reluctant to read my poems at local readings. It's not that I don't want to, but I feel slighted – insulted even. If you want to listen to good things, you should pay for it. Then people will come, they will pay because they want to listen.

Another thing is poetry recitation after a minister's speech, or anybody's speech, complete with tray bearers who have never known poetry in their lives. The poor poet is stuck on the stage, reading poems. I usually refuse to do it. People think I'm a bit *sombong*, arrogant. But it's okay, *sombong* for literature is okay.

You've travelled widely in Europe, North America and Asia. Travel is also a prominent motif in your poems. How has it shaped your cultural identity?

I try not to travel in certain continents only because, I am afraid that, like the English language, it will try to control me. So I try to go to as many countries, east and west, and in fact, together we [my wife and I] went on a 23-day cruise of Polynesia. I travel in Southeast Asia quite often, but I have not been to Cambodia. I try to travel because like literature these are people with universal ideas and experiences, such as suffering, so I like that. When I travel I usually have this experience; this is me coming to an experience, and this experience is like a match, it starts a little fire and there's a poem. If I stay in Malaysia I take everything for granted. But when I go, say, to Thailand, life there is just like ours, but there's always something different. These travels are very necessary for

me to start writing – not about the country itself, but insights into human beings, insights into situations, and the universal meaning of these experiences.

I also like languages. I like to listen to languages, although I don't understand them. I like their writings. I'll search for writings from that country, especially in translation. I got a book of short stories from Laos that is now out of print. I not only travel, but I look for the poets, for the writers, like Sunthorn Phu (Thailand). I also go to the writers' houses. Once when I was in Boston, I was in a car; suddenly there was this little sign that says Frost's house, the poet Robert Frost. I didn't know it was there. I really am a fan of his poems. I stopped, went and there was a little path, and this was the path that he wrote about in "The Road Not Taken," the famous poem. It's amazing. And before that, I went to Emily Dickinson's house. These are major poets. I feel that these are the icons of human achievement, in literature especially. I'm a kin to them, I'm a younger brother, son of a common tradition of writing; therefore, I seek them out. I went to Nietzche's house in Germany. I went to Goethe's house – Germany was just opening up then, and it was in eastern Germany. Schiller, Shakespeare, Keats. In London, I went to Winchester. There was this little path that Keats used to take a walk on. So this is the type of experience I look for, and the country's history of course, as that's related to literature.

If I don't take something from these countries, I give something from myself. I read poems, or give talks on Malaysian literature, and *pantun*. I've been lecturing about *pantuns* in many, many places, and I force, after one hour or two hours' talk, the listeners to write poems. It's been quite successful, in Hawaii, Germany, Japan, Vancouver. I think I'm enriched by travel, I get ideas, and I think I'm a more a sensitive person because I travel. I've broken the *tempurung*, I think.

And travel doesn't make you less Malay? Because some people say when you go abroad, you become Westernised or you forget your roots. What would be your response to that sort of view?

If you're small, you'll get influenced. But if your sense of self is bigger than that, if you have a certain stand and a past, and a collection of experiences, what is England? What is Laos? But I can see the specialty in Laos - gentle people, a slower pace of life. I learn from these things. I think I'm bigger than a little country, or even America. I lived for about six or seven years in America. I didn't become Westernised. But of course I'm influenced a little by, say, their efficiency. I used to say that I'm not very Malay. I demand efficiency, I demand proper work when work is expected, and I demand a show of interest from people working for me. In Malaysia I had a hard time. One of the reasons why I retired was this – you can't work with people. You give a task, it's not done, or if it's done, in such a way that you've got to do double the work later.

Recently, I attended a forum on language and power in Shah Alam, organized by the Penang Institute. At the forum you mentioned that younger generation of Malaysians' grasp of language is quite poor, whether it's Malay or English, partly because of the exam-oriented nature of the education system. To what extent can language and literary studies solve this problem?

It can solve not only the mastery of languages, but the making of identity. The Malays usually don't think they have any identity. As somebody said – one not-so-young man that I heard through somebody else – "I've nothing to be proud of as a Malay, except that I am a Muslim." This is very serious, very judgmental. He knows nothing about Malay literature. Take Hang Tuah, there is no other character like him or any other story like it in the whole of world literature, as far as I know. Not even in Shakespeare's plays. *Sulalatus Salatin*, *pantun*, they're very special. If you don't know that you're a rich person, you go around feeling poor. And with the help of the present government, we don't know any of these things, we don't read. People read some pantuns, but nobody reads *Hang Tuah*. And young people come to me and say, "I like *Hang Tuah*." I ask them, "Have you read the original?" Some say they have not, some say they can't understand it. But it's not that difficult to understand, right? What we have is a culturally rich people who don't even know what they have. And so you go around feeling very poor. What identity does a Malay have except language? Now we have this Arabisation of Malay and the Malay people. Everyone wants to imitate the Arabs.

I think the lack of knowledge of one's own culture is a problem , and this doesn't happen in Japan, and doesn't happen in England – they're so proud of Shakespeare. When I was in Standard Six, we had to read simplified tales from Shakespeare, and then in Form Four or Form Five, we had to read the actual plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, which is very difficult. But the British didn't care. "This is our great literary works and you should read it," they said. We can't do the same. Those involved in curriculum planning are not educated in a holistic way. Then, when the curriculum has been carefully laid out, the minister comes in and says, "Oh, do this instead." So the curriculum has to be changed yet again.

Were you involved in the curriculum planning for the Malaysian schools?

I was, in the early years. In our time, we selected texts for Form Six – Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel was included. Indonesian literature was included, also Malaysian literature. There were also the classical works – students read *Sulalatus Salatin*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. But now, they are no longer in the school syllabus. So what do you expect, when this fellow says, "I've got nothing to be proud of as a Malay except that I'm a Muslim?" He doesn't even

know his own language, culture or history. After all, Malay is an exquisite language, exquisite.

What constitutes Malaysian literature? We're still confused about it; we're still disagreeing about it.

Yes, the Malays write about the Malays, the Chinese write about the Chinese.

Still on the topic of language since you went to an English medium school when you were young. Some have called for bringing back English medium schools in order to improve the standard of English language in Malaysia. Do you think this is a realistic solution, bringing back something from the colonial period to resolve this?

I think you pointed out the problem. I believe these people have no history; they only want their children to be good in English. That's the main point. And they don't bother whether their children are good in Malay or not. Most of their children are not good in Malay. They can't use good Malay like the Indonesians do. And they think, still, that the colonial language is better than our own. Well, in some ways it is better, but you should have some pride of being Malaysian. The problem with the English taught here is bad teaching. I know. I was in Holland for two years, and I've been there often. They teach English so well; when they come to university they speak English like an English person, almost. And they also teach French very well. In my time, or my friends' time, especially lecturers in university, they can speak French when they meet a French person, and when discussing literature, they speak French. When an English person comes, no problem – or if a German person came, no problem in communicating. Now, I think the teaching is the problem. It's a serious issue and it has been pointed out often – the teachers themselves don't speak English very well. In some cases, children who just came back from overseas have to correct the lecturer or the teacher. So I think the problem is that. How come the Swedish, the Norwegian, the Danish and the Dutch have mastery over English while they speak their own language every day, and write in their own language?

But they don't have this view that English is a threat, because that's how some people feel about English?

It [English] *is* killing a lot of languages. I have not encountered it, but I can bet that at least a hundred languages have been killed by English; because it's so strong, the other languages die. Now, Malay is in a way killing Kadazan, but Kadazan also is partly being killed by English, because they speak English and they're too shy to speak Kadazan. The Orang Ulu, the Iban people are also

ashamed to speak their own languages. Sadly these two languages are killing many other languages. And English is killing us [the Malay language].

I'm a writer in English and Malay, but I think I'm a Malaysian. I have my own tradition. It's a great tradition. While I want English to be a language that I have mastery over, I want to master French also. I want to master as many languages as possible. And my model's not England, or Singapore, that doesn't have a culture. My model is Norway, or Sweden, or Holland, or perhaps Germany. They teach very well; because we didn't teach well, that's why these things have been happening for many years, and there have been too many ministers interfering with our plans.

So, after almost 60 years of independence, 50 years after the creation of Malaysia, we're still arguing about language, until today. Do you see this as part of the growing pains of a nation? Is it a healthy thing? Or is it a sign that things are getting worse, in relations between ethnic groups, class?

I think Tun Razak tried to solve the problem. We need a nation, it should be a Malaysian nation, and all countries, nations, nation-states, and a people that are united have one education system. America is so big, so huge, it has one education system in the English language, but you can have other languages if you want to study them. England too, of course; they don't teach Punjabi just because they have Punjabis around, or Urdu because there are Pakistanis around. Or Thailand, which also has a single education system. Indonesia is so huge, with 250 million [people], and it has a single education system. But we dismantle it, because of politics. Give some to the Chinese, take away some from the Malays, give some to the Indians, take some from the Chinese. So in the end, the Malays don't know their culture, don't know their language; the Chinese too. They are very proud of their culture and language, I can imagine. But nobody steps in to say, "This is the core of Malaysian identity, the subjects you need to take" and so on. And of course, learning is through recitation and remembering. If you study language you've got to learn it here [pointing to the heart], right?

Most of these people get A's, and when you talk to them – even the young Malays from Kelantan, Terengganu – they can't speak standard Malay. This is sad. In Indonesia – I was there recently – even the younger people can really speak at a higher level, at an intellectual level; and here, we encourage our students to speak at the bazaar level, or the bizarre level, rather. You can go to any country except Malaysia and Singapore, and ask them to speak the national language. Sixty years, right? The Malaysians of Indian descent, they can speak Malay very well, except for a few. They can speak it. We need a language that can unite us, a standard language, a good and proper language. I know – I

suffered when I supervised students. Their Malay is bad, so is their English. I don't know; I think it's the system. Other people can do it – why can't we?

You also said before that the Malay language has the rhythm of the sea. What else have you learned from your research on the Malay language and the nature of the language itself?

It's one of the gentlest and most sophisticated, etiquette-wise. In the older language, there is the "surface" language and then you have an undercurrent of meaning that not many people have now. We still have bits and pieces of it – such as in the *pantun*. You can try to find other meanings in the *pantun* than the surface meaning. That is quite special, and I have no problem using Malay to describe things. In those days, I had problems describing things in Malay. Now I have problems describing things in English because I've not used the language for quite some time. But it's possible to do many things in Malay that people think was not possible. We have PhDs in nuclear science, we have PhDs in mathematics, all in Malay. I find that I can do anything with it. I can write philosophical pieces, I can write poetry, I can write descriptions, and I can be very poetic. Not many languages are poetic and among the best writers in Malaysia, like Baha Zain – who is the best writer in Malay– not many people are as good as he is. But people don't read him, people read about somebody in the newspapers. That is our problem too. We take something from the mud and throw away the diamonds and the pearls. And that's the history of the Malays too. We can't distinguish which are the real things, which are the lasting things; we go for the momentary experience, sensations – *pesta* (carnival). That's my view.

I feel that it's a big language, and the Chinese can help develop the Malay language, so can Iban. Jong Chen Lai writes well in Malay, so does Lim Swee Tin. My model is Indonesia for the Malay language, we all build the language, we make it really good. The Sundanese contributed to Bahasa Indonesia, the Minangkabau, Batak – everybody contributed to it. That should be our style. And we can build a really dynamic language before too long.

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