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

Salleh ben Joned's poems have been described as "traumatizing" to the Malays by Muhammad Haji Salleh, one of Malaysia's poet laureates, because of their irreverence toward Malay supremacy (a concept that continues to operate within the socio-political structure of the country) and Islam.[1] In his latest collection, *Adam's Dream*, Salleh's "profanity" continues in its witty and ironic strides, unapologetically poking fun at many of the nation's "sacred cows." Yet, to read these poems as solely an attack against the status quo is to miss their serious attempts to unravel the doublespeak of much of the country's political rhetoric, as well as their honest enquiry into the state of self-denial that informs much of Malaysia's stance on race, religion and class.

The collection is divided into five sections, each dealing with a particular theme. The first, aligned to the volume's title, revolves around the difficult imbrication between religious belief, poetry and racial identity (with a bit of politics thrown in). There is a tradition in Islam which posits that poetry is opposed to faith because it renders "truth" equivocal and revelation ambiguous. Yet, Salleh's poems are insistent that this is a deep misgiving, for the unlettered Prophet's message to Muslims is nothing less than poetry itself. As the poem "Adam's Dream in His" attests:

> Fullness is truly all; the ripeness
> Of faith's freedom in fate,
> In heaven as on earth.
> Those profane, blasphemous drunks
> And true poets knew it:
> They too dreamt Adam's dream.
> Great dreamers they were in fact
> And in fiction. Each one
> A believer in Heart. (13-14)

Poetry then, is the heart of faith, and those who are attuned to the "violence" done to language are also the most susceptible to belief. Clearly, Salleh's influence here seems to be English Romantics, for his view echoes Shelley's position when he writes that "[a] poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth," and that the "poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, no less than as regards creation."[2] Poetry, rather than obscuring the truth of faith, actually vitalises

[1] See his review of *Salleh ben Joned's Sajak Sajak Salleh*/*Poems Sacred and Profane* in *Tenggara*, 24.

[2] Percy B. Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry." *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism.* Eds. D.H. Reiman and S.B. Powers. Norton: New York, 1970: 485, 492.

and accentuates its perennial features, and the poet, because he "knows" this, comes closer, as in the case of Adam, the first man, to the "original" truth embedded in faith's pronouncements. But this truth, as several poems in this section attest, remains fluid and multiplicated. Indeed, such a view contradicts the stance of many monotheistic faiths which insist on the unquestionable singularity of their version of "truth." For Salleh however, Adam's dream and the dream which created Adam are, in the end, interrelated and uncertain, and of which "None of my interpretation feels right." Hence, the final and only recourse is for the poet to "let [truth] be/ In all its teasing ambiguity" ("Dreaming of Being in Adam's Dream" 15-16).

One of the more remarkable pieces in this section is the picture poem "Spirit of the Keris," a poem written in the shape of the weapon symbolic of the Malays. The sliding of words from one line to the next, symbiotically weaving ideas and meaning even as the shape of the keris comes into formation, is suggestive of the various interlocking elements that go into its making and the levels of symbolism it connotes for its people. Again, the Romantic influence on Salleh is unmistakable: Blake's "The Tyger" (another symbol of Malayness) is blatantly evoked as the "soul" behind the forging of this ancient instrument. Yet, a possibly incidental irony aligns the poem once more to the critical direction which Salleh's poems often take. When the poem draws comparison between the power of the keris with "a dream nation/ envy of all," (19) it is perhaps questioning the imaginary construction of the weapon's power – an aspect corresponding with all symbols – and directly, the desire to be "supreme" that characterises the people's fantasy? That the end of the poem is not rounded off by a sharp tip of a single letter, but the dull edge of a flat "-ness" (19) further suggests the blunting of such a racial objective that the poem is illustrating.

Salleh's debt to postmodern literature is evinced in "Meaning in Blankness," a prose poem that manipulates the convention of invisibility to signify presence. A poem which had to be eventually "dropped" from the collection appears here, in the guise of an absent presence upon which the rest of the poems in this section rely. This poem, potentially "blasphemous," is the trace that places in motion the motivation for other pieces but will remain "lost" until such a time when it is suitable for it to be "stumbled upon" again. Whether or not such a poem actually exists is, perhaps, beside the point. As in any good old fashioned postmodern text, that this poem playfully negates the boundaries that set up binary structures such as absence/presence, lost/found, poem/prose and sacred/sacrilege is, in my view, the sense which the piece tries to elucidate.

Section two revolves around poems that relate to the family. In pieces like "Letting You Be," "Adam K, My Only Son," and the two "Wife of Wives," Salleh reveals his strong affection for and attachment to his family. But lest one starts to detect a proclivity towards sentimentality in his poems, Salleh punctures this with "The Barely Bearable Lightness of Being," a poem which insinuates the darker side – albeit represented wittily – of being married. The wanton practice of polygamy is vilified in another poem, "A Polyphonic Hymn to Polygamy," which recounts a

man's sexual exploits that ends in religious punishment when he is unable to fulfil his Hajj because the airport at Medina has been taken over by terrorists. Typical here is Salleh's irony at showing up the incompatibility between religious injunctions and man's corruption which he then attempts to disguise with religion. But such a strategy will end in "poetic" justice, thus relating this poem back to the premise laid in the first section on the relationship between poetry and religion:

> This fucking mad man's holy-minded whim
> Remained to his death unconsummated.
> A fitting end for a man who misused
> His marital privilege as a Muslim? (63)

Reflections on the family become important catalyst for Salleh to flesh out his thoughts on the nation, thus bringing together two related features of belonging. In the poem "An Evening in Malaya," two Malay songs inspire nostalgia for an image of Malayness that is associated with grace, beauty and spontaneity – all of which have become increasingly obfuscated by today's national obsession with modernism, status and wealth. And yet, perhaps as a self-reflexive criticism of the poet's own propensity to bask in the "good old day's," that a footnote reveals that "An Evening in Malaya" is a song made popular by an *Indonesian* singer suggests that such nostalgia is ultimately founded on a fantasy after all, and that such an image is nothing more than the poet's retrospective desire for what he *wished* had been.

"In Memoriam," the third section of this collection, brings together pieces dedicated to the memory of Salleh's friends and fellow poets (K. Das, A.D. Hope, James MacAuley, Gwen Harwood, Usman Awang, Ee Tiang Hong) and, more movingly, his daughter Maria (who passed away when she was four). Unlike the usually praiseworthy dimensions inherent in such dedicatory poems, Salleh is often critical of, and demonstrates his disagreement with, some of the views that these poets hold. For example, Salleh points out the inherent myopia in Ee Tiang Hong's poem, "Patriotism," that the Bumiputra rights confer superior status to the Malays, forgetting the fact that "the elementary right/ To believe in whatever gods I like" (85) has been taken away from them at the same time. Yet, this does not, however, detract Salleh from his genuine respect and admiration for his fellow poets, who, above all, stood firmly by their convictions. This section ends with "Ana al haq," a poem dedicated to the Muslim apostate Husayn ibn Mansur al-Halaj. It is a technically interesting piece which bears careful analysis, especially in its form and placement/splicing of words. The lack of space denies me such a privilege except to highlight the poem's conference of the title "martyr" on a supposed enemy of the faith. The fourth section activates what it professes, and that is to provide "An Offering of Pantuns." A *pantun* is Malay verse-form that operates on the rigid principle of interlocking rhymed couplets and lines of between eight to ten syllables. The pantuns here are deployed for the various reasons commonplace in Salleh's

writing: dedication, criticism ("Pantun for Perverts" which targets politicians and narrow mindedness) and celebration.

The last section is subtitled "Verses Variously Vicious" and the poems collected here are largely satirical of the contemporary socio-political scenario. In "five star poetry," what the poet wittily perceives as the nation's influx of poets and poetry is, in truth, the ability of politicians and business conglomerates to manipulate words in order to push their hidden agendas. Pretentious intellectualism is the target of the piece, "we got minda, they only got mind," where the very fact that the word "minda" is derived from "mind" already belies the unacknowledged borrowing of Western views and concepts. That this is then further (albeit poorly) disguised as "our" superior knowledge over "theirs" reveals not only the poverty of "our" intellectual climate but its dishonesty and self-deception as well. This point is effectively drummed home with the constant appearance of "borrowed" words (*kritikus, intelektual, dramatis, nobelis, realisma, asimilasi* and so forth) scattered throughout an otherwise brief poem. The complementary piece to this poem is "testament in engmalchin" that criticises the justification for the use of Manglish that essentially disguises laziness and a refusal to learn with alleged patriotism. The other poems in this section are "Have *Tempurung* will Travel" (which plays on the proverb of "a frog under the coconut shell," signifying narrow-mindedness), "Infinite Orgasm" (which questions the sexual exploits a Muslim man will enjoy in paradise), "Spermatic Politics or Bugger It" (tellingly reflective of the case of the ex-Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia) and "In Praise of Kemunting" (a poem which satirically interrelate smut, stupidity and the detention rationale in the country). The collection concludes with the sexually charged "a hymn to durian," a poem which plays on the various signifiers of "appetite."

It is not difficult to see, from this brief review of Salleh's latest volume, why Mohammad Haji Salleh would be uncomfortable with this poet. Blasphemy aside, Salleh's poems unashamedly enquire into many so-called "sensitive" issues of the country and reveal, in the process, their illogicity, contradictions and sometimes, even perversions. Yet, as Salleh is also careful to note, that he writes poetry and not deliberate polemics should declare that his intention is foremost aesthetical and not political (for example, the poems ""Meaning in Blankness" and "Thank God it's Friday"). To read his poem as nothing more than the ranting of a nay-sayer is to miss its vitality, a moment of art that ironises, satirises and unveils what is hidden.

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