

My Che Guru

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Ridentem dicere, verum quid vetat?

Who says I can't joke while telling the truth?

— Horace

One does not write about Salleh Ben Joned — Malaysian Poet and enfant terrible of the literary elite — without trepidation and an impious reverence.

He is a *Keramat* — sacred Ground to the Malay Spirit — even though they have rejected him as their Son.

No prophet is ever embraced in his own home.

In this *Keramat* lies the Voice (Salleh's self-dubbed BIG MOUTH) of Malay conscience and the hope for a Nation *not a Race* (italics mine).

Margret Drabble called him “an excellent Guide” who forayed into art, religion, sex, politics and literature with a diabolical ribaldry that shook the bangsa Melayu and spoke truth to ALL Malaysians.

Prof Muhammad Hj Salleh, in his review of *Sajak Sajak Saleh* (a pun by Salleh on his own name, since Mat Saleh is a nickname for a white man), described it as the most traumatic event of the Malay literary scene.

“The role of the Poet as leader and elder of society” is desecrated. Sally's blasé response was, “No thank you Prof that is in part responsible for the typical Malay poet being a bloody bore.”

With Malaysia's political and moral implosion, we need Salleh's clarion satire and spectacular brand of Jihad now more than ever: death by laughter.

One just has to read ‘Kiss my Arse,’ when he talks about the UMNO general assembly in 1992. A Kelantanese delegate, disgusted with the dirty political tactics of the time, brought the house down with an anecdote about the power of the anus — which ultimately is King.

Salleh refined it all down to a ‘thinking anus.’ This piece will have you roaring in tandem with the embarrassing escape of a few *kentuts*.

(Incidentally, not much has changed in UMNO except that this A*** has swallowed the country.)

This was the quintessential Salleh.

Nothing was sacred in his quest for “truth and ideals not narrowed by the myopia of race and religion.”

Sensual and obscene, he believed that “we must learn to greet love, laugh and dance with each other in the middle of our taboo zones.”

I knew Salleh — not in the manner of the biblical ‘knowing,’ which he would wink lewdly at — long before I met him.

When “this lightning bolt came straight at me” at UM, he was an old familiar, cast from the same Stardust as my brother Karam Singh Veriah — who was jailed under the ISA for his genius and incendiary rhetoric.

They were both daemons of a lesser god, divine and crass, blessed and cursed.

Salleh was family.

Defiant in black, complete with Che’s beret, sashaying his tight sexy loins across the arts concourse, Salleh gave his students permission to be shameless... rapacious even in our pursuit of “an informed mind and an informed heart to see through and beyond the inherited blinkers of race and religion.”

He was a citizen of the world in the likes of James Joyce, whom he admired.

“Malaysia is my country and so is the world... my true country is world literature.”

For daring to steal fire like Prometheus to enlighten the parochial Malay Minda from race and religion, Salleh was damned to the charge of apostasy by his own people.

It was an excruciating misreading of his heart (he was madly devoted to Allah). The pain of rejection became a double-edged sword in his writing, as he hit highs and lows.

Combative and even cruel, he was merciless in unmasking ignorance. It cost him a position in the pantheon of Malay *sasterawan*.

“I have blasphemed against the Holiest of Holies, the inbred... Malay sasterawan, that shrill articulator of the Soul of the Race (race, not nation, mind you).”

He was tender to the Seeker, like a mother with a child, to people like myself. But he was destructive to the duplicitous and the Pretenders.

It was not past him to unzip his pants and piss on their art. Literally, as he did on Redza Piyadasa’s manifesto at his 1974 art exhibition, *Towards a Mystical Reality*. This was Salleh's Zen response.

Elitism and Wannabes in the Art scene drove him berserk (he would prefer the word amok) and he would become a tempest of vulgarity.

It was as if he needed to smear everything in shit in the name of our common humanity, and remind us of Icarus’s waxen wings.

That he was sublime there is no doubt. One has only to read the metaphysical “Spirit of the Kris.” The sheer magic of his imagery is Miltonian.

Salleh’s psyche was Jungian in epic portions: *The Hero and His Shadow*.

Talking of Heroes... did I mention that he saved me three times?

Not particularly academic, I had “flashes of brilliance and flashes of stupidity” (to quote Fadzil Amin, my Tutor at UM). I needed a Second Upper to get to England to do my MA. Salleh grabbed me by the collar at my viva voce and shook me so hard that Dr Faustus, Shakespeare and Donne clattered out of my head.

His vision of an informed mind lifted me into academia.

(He couldn't stop hugging me when I came home with blue contact lenses. Bless his huge heart.)



The second time Salleh threw me a lifeline was when I had a baby at 44.

I had been scarred by the spectre of premature deaths in my childhood and absolutely petrified of maiming my son Daniel — physically and emotionally.

Salleh, himself fingered by obscene tragedy, held us in his arms with a quiet certitude that I was not accustomed to. It was a prescient surety that we would survive and thrive.

After all, he had.

And I did.

It was his Blessed assurance in God the Compassionate. The same Allah who had not struck him down.

2020 unleashed an existential crisis in the world. For Malaysia it was a double fold plague, with the back door government's scourge on democracy.

(I swear I can hear Salleh interject "*Buntut! Buntut!*" He left us in that year but had been absent for several years, as he regressed into his own world.)

Engulfed by disappointment and human ugliness on global proportions — as Refugees were rounded up in fetters and suicides flared — I picked up my pen and started writing ... only to be upbraided!

My voice was not racially halal. The fragile Malay sensibility teetering under the putrescence of Najib's Corruption and the hubris of Bumigeoise (Salleh's word du jour) privilege could not withstand any more scrutiny and shame.

I sank into the quagmire of self-censorship, coming up for air with my Analyst. There seemed to be no Hope and I forgot many things.... all that was good and kind and just.

Laughter and friends.

The taste of Malaysian food.

I channelled Virginia Woolf as my Muse tethered me to an Idea of Me.

And then, Phoenix-like...

Fahmi Reza blitzes OUR imagination and lights up the Malaysian night sky.

SATIRE IS NOT A CRIME.

Serendipitous.

Salleh arises out of this maggoty morass. The physical resemblance is uncanny. The words are Salleh.

And I hear his voice reprimand us from the grave:

“Ash... To me the worst is when a writer uses his God-given talent to prostitute a collective ideal.”

The Idea of Me uncoupled from the Collective Ideal.

Art must never be a whore.

Our gifts are not to please Man.

There is responsibility to Truth and Justice.

We can only ask ourselves: how did a 16-year-old Malay boy from Malacca — after chancing upon Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, the first piece of English literature in his life — transform his brilliant mind to channel a voice that spoke to The Everyman?



Adibah Amin puts it succinctly: “Salleh is Si Luncai, the peasant boy who shocks the Palace by comparing his father’s bald head with the King’s.”

Salleh’s own words are *Rendah Hati*.

Laugh at yourself, don’t be afraid of shame. Laugh and others will laugh with you.

As the Africans say, an elephant does not die in a secret place. And you don’t have to ask directions to the *Jamban*. It’s on the nose.

So crack jokes, poke fun! Be cruel to be kind, lance the boil — it is medicine for the Soul of the Nation.

This was opposed to *rendah diri* (humiliating himself) as Salleh was accused of doing by the traditionalists of the day who were so afraid to lose face (*malu*).

In his courage to stare down bigotry and racial superiority, Salleh Ben Joned was very much a lone voice. He is a National Treasure.

The strong man must learn to be lonely. Arthur Miller.