

Religious Faith Challenges in Salleh Ben Joned's Adam's Dream

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Abstract

Often considered a non-conformist or Malaysia's maverick writer, Salleh Ben Joned is not afraid of going beyond the parameters. One of the issues he always goes beyond its parameters is religion. In his witty and ironic manner, unapologetically teases many of the nation's "sacred cows". He is particularly concerned about the creeping institutionalisation of religion, which is one of the factors have kept Malaysia from its true potential. In his literary stuff, Salleh Ben Joned always considers religion as one of the important issues of Malay society. Adam's Dream, the last published work of Salleh Ben Joned, depicts fifty poems in five sections. This paper provides a study which concentrates on the religious views of Salleh Ben Joned in his collection of his poems "Adam's Dream". It can be said that Salleh Ben Joned's attitude towards the challenges of religious faith in his collection of poems Adam's Dream is the continuation and better to say in verse repetition of his attitudes toward religious faith in his previous works. In Adam's Dream Again Salleh with his witty and ironic manner and his alleged audacity, plays and probes with religious issues and its impact on Malaysian society, history, politics and women.

Key Words: Religious issues, Hadith, Challenges, Faith, Malay society

1. Introduction

Salleh Ben Joned was born in Melaka in 1941. Son of a taxi-driver, Salleh received his primary and secondary education in Malacca. He went on further studies in Australia where he became acquainted with two of Australia's great poets, James McAuley and A. D. Hope whose poetry Salleh greatly admires. He is highly influenced by these poets. McAuley was a radical poet and came from the generation of Australian men who drank heavily, told bawdy jokes and called a spade a spade (for which he was famous). Salleh attributes his interest to poetry in McAuley in *As I Please*:

But it's Jim the teacher of literature and poet whom I want to recall in this essay in homage, though it is true. That public figure cannot be separated from the teacher and poet; in all the three roles he was distinguished by full-bodied convictions, by the firmness of his stand. (As I Please, 7)

After ten years in Australia for his first and M.A. degrees, Salleh returned to Malaysia and worked as a lecturer at the University of Malaya. He quits his position after ten years of service and has since become a freelance writer. His first collection of bilingual poetry, *Sajak-Sajak Saleh/Poems Sacred and Profane* was published in 1987. *As I Please*, a collection of his prose pieces in Malaysia's then leading English daily, *New Strait Times*, came out in 1994, and his second collection of newspaper articles *Nothing Is Sacred* was published in 2003. His last book of poetry, *Adam's Dream* was released during the Kuala Lumpur Literary Festival in 2007.

Often considered a non-conformist or Malaysia's maverick writer, Salleh Ben Joned is not afraid of going beyond the parameters. After publication of his first book, *Sajak-Sajak Saleh/Poems Sacred and Profane*, Muhammad Haji Salleh says in an academic article that "the appearance of Salleh's books was the most traumatic experience in Malay literary scene". Incensed by his blithe disrespect for totems and taboos several Malay-Muslim writers, academics and assorted individuals have pinned various labels on him; the mildest is *Mat Salleh* –the Malay nickname for an Englishman. One of the issues he always goes beyond its parameters is religion. He always daringly questions Malay Muslim character. In his witty and ironic manner, unapologetically teases many of the nation's "sacred cows".

In an article that deals with post-colonial dilemma in identity entitled as 'national identity in Malay literature', the argument of the writer is that the Malay literary consciousness in Malaysia, "alienated the non-Malay groups (as well as quite a few Malay writers) in Malaysia both politically and in the field of literature, because it aims at the religious devotion to writers, not their capacity in writing" (Littrup, 473). This indicates that the Malay society, if given a preference, would quote religion as the most powerful factor. Having said that, of course, there must be a reminder that Malaysia is a fast developing new nation, which places much importance on nation building and progress, as well as science and technology.

In such a society, according to Noritah Omar "Ben Joned dares to use sacred images of Islamic history such as the first revelation received by the prophet in his exploration of the Muslim self-identity"(111). He is particularly concerned about the creeping institutionalisation of religion, which is one of the factors have kept Malaysia from its true potential. Salleh brought about his religious ideas for the first time in the poem "Haram Scarum" in collection of his poems *sajak-sajak saleh/poems sacred and profane*. The following stanza from this poem shows Ben Joned's personal and public views as a Muslim.

But that-that's different, untouchable!
We're Moslems, and terribly Malay.

*Some things are just unmentionable;
The rest are okay if we pray.*

...
*Our one dislike we have to keep
To preserve our identity;
So long as we hate pigs and pray
We remain Moslem and Malay*

In this poem, Salleh indicates the absurdity of religious practice which believes that “so long as [they] hate pigs and pray, [they’ll] remain Muslim and Malay” (145). It is especially disturbing for Salleh that this community would grudgingly accept other aspects of life that are considered haram (banned in a religious manner) in Islam as a lesser crime, but rather, they will focus conveniently on only the abstinence of pork in their diet as a major form of salvation in order to be a Muslim. He mentions in the first stanza that his community does not deal aggressively with “drinking, gambling, lying, and bribing” (145), and also prostitution and hogging, as the main enemies of Islam. Instead, they seem to dwell on only the easiest fact of life they could avoid, which is avoiding pork. Salleh does not accept this latter factor as any more important in magnitude, when compared with the others mentioned formerly. In fact, Salleh goes all out to address the most sensitive issues that prevail in his society, true to his rebellious nature.

2. Analysis

In his literary stuff, Salleh Ben Joned always considers religion as one of the important issues of Malay society. *Adams’ Dream*, the last published work of Salleh Ben Joned, depicts fifty poems in five sections: “Adam’s Dream,” “Family Fables,” “In Memoriam,” “An Offering of Pantuns” and “Verses Variousy Vicious” – each addressing various issues in the poet’s distinctive style. In the volume’s first section, i.e. “Adam’s Dream,” Salleh deals with the issue of religion and its impact on Malaysian society, history, politics and women along with many of his impudent comments on the subject. However, such audacity is expected from a poet who has already been accused of heresy, blasphemy and apostasy by several quarters.

It can be said that Salleh Ben Joned’s attitude towards religious faith in his collection of poems *Adam’s Dream* is the continuation and better to say in verse repetition of his attitudes toward religious faith challenges in his previous works ‘*sajak-sajak saleh/poems sacred and profane*’, ‘*As I Please*’ and ‘*Nothing is Sacred*’. Salleh in *Adam’s Dream* again criticizes Hadith and wrong interpretations of Quran verses. He begins all his poems which are related to religion with a verse from the Quran or a Hadith to show the subject of the poems. In an essay which was written in *As I Please* at the height of controversy on Kassim Ahmad’s book on the Hadith in 1986 entitled as ‘A Little Knowledge is Not Always a Dangerous Thing: Kassim Ahmad and the Hadith’, Salleh mentions his ideas about Hadiths and wrong interpretation of Quran verses.

Salleh starts the essay with acknowledging that he is incapable of exercising self-censorship, even in the aspect of religious faith (*As I Please*, 30). His view is that in Malaysia, religion is a “treacherous theological thicket ruled with monopolistic vigour by a secret society of *ulamas* [religious preacher]” (*As I Please*, 30). Apart from these arguments, this writer adds that through the debate on the Hadiths (interpretations of prophet Mohammad’s saying and behavior) is a relatively new one in Malaysia, yet it had been

existent as early as in the 19th century. He clarifies that by no means is such a debate a negation of God.

In an apt judgment, Salleh signifies that “Islam itself is not closeted” (As I Please, 32), though it maybe the religious practice of the in-groups in certain unique situations, to make it seems so. Here Salleh implies that Islam has universal values. However, he is aware that he is not one of “those simple minded souls to whom faith is a simple matter of doing what their *Lebai* [religious teacher] or *Imam* [priest] says” (As I Please, 32).

He would much rather be involved in a spirituality fulfilling debate concerning the Hadith and the Quran itself (As I Please, 31). He hopes that by doing so, he could derive a clearer picture of his own religion, in the religion of Salleh,” even the genuine [Hadith] are culture bound and limited by historical circumstances and humanity of the prophet “(As I Please, 32). Therefore, he agrees with kassim Ahmad’s concept in the book the Hadith: “A re-evaluation, that the holy Quran should be the only guide for Muslims” (As I Please, 33). He is certain that only through the Quran can one “recover the pure faith and pristine simplicity of Islam as well as justice and brotherhood “(As I Please, 33). Furthermore, he agrees with kassim Ahmad, that since “the dubious Hadith as a source of theology and jurisprudence was the main cause of the break-up of the Islamic world that led eventually to the decay of a great civilization, it’s abandonment would ensure the recovery of the lost unity and greatness”(As I Please ,33).

Moreover, he views the existent contradictory Hadith which occurred as the result of differing interpretation, was purposefully done by “factions to further and justify their political causes” (As I Please, 33). Since Hadiths are historically bound” (As I Please, 35), Salleh’s opinion is that there are not quite authentic. He feels that they can by no means outweigh the Holy Quran which is the religious guide for those of the Muslim faith. However, the people continue to argue on religious issues and as a result be divided, mainly because of their need to be right or to be superior.

Though the Hadiths are confusing, Salleh maintains that prophet Muhammad and his sayings are quintessential in the Islamic religion. He argues that if one was to “dismantle that, not much would be left other than moral platitudes which all religious teach” (As I Please, 34). Contrarily the writer is confused too by the thought that, “the prophet was after a human being conditioned by circumstances and the needs of his time and his culture”(As I Please .34). However, he would think that the Quran is more authoritative as it has a universal appeal and it is not bound by either era or location. At the same time, Salleh finds that the Quran remains”very opaque or at the very least ambiguous” (As I Please, 34), which causes it to be open to various interpretations.

Adam’s Dream begins with “Adams’s Dream in His”. This poem also has some comments and a start by questioning the literal minded interpretation that woman was created from the rib of man. In *Nothing Is Sacred*, Salleh Ben Joned argues this matter as well. In “Straight Rib, Crooked Rib, No Rib. See?” which was written on ‘The Rights of Women in Islam’ by Asghar Ali Engineer, Salleh believes that Engineer’s book is a re-evaluation of some fundamental issues in Islam and specially re-awakening Muslim women. Engineer’s book claims that “Muslim must go back to Quran and reinterpret it with a fresh, truly creative and rational mind to ensure the social, economic, moral and spiritual of the *Ummah* (Nothing Is Sacred, 357). And if the verses on the women reinterpret on the basis of a concrete experience of now and in the light liberated consciousness ,it can be seen that “God intended women to be equal with men”(Nothing Is Sacred,357).

Salleh continues his debate with quoting Engineer’s interpretation of the Quranic verse, “O mankind (sic)! be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living

entity ,and out of it created its mate, and out of two spread abroad a multitude of men and women”(The Quran, Surah 4, An Nisa, (women), verse 1). In his defense of equality of men and women, Engineer with the support of linguistic analysis by Amina Wadud-Muhsin on two key terms in this verse: *Nafs*, which means living entity, gender unspecified and the second one, *zawj* woman’s mate (husband) as well as a man’s mate (wife) concludes that “the Quran does not allude to the business of Eve being created out of Adams’s rib (straight or crooked); it does not even say anything about eve created after Adam and note that unlike the Bible ,the Quran does not blame them for fall of humankind on Eve” (Nothing Is Sacred,358).

Salleh believes that non-sexist, non- patriarchal interpretation of Quranic verses clear all the obstacles to the emancipation of Muslim women and “On the basis of the Holy *Kitab*, Muslim women can now claim practically all the moral, social, economic and political rights that Muslim men have enjoyed for centuries at the expense of their long-suffering sisters in Islam” (Nothing Is Sacred, 359)

The poem goes on with debating on poet and poetry. 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. He offers instead the paradox of “poetic non-poetry”. 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.

One of the other poems in the first section of Adam’s Dream which deals with religious faith is “Poetry and Pus”. It starts with a Hadith by Abu Huraira on poetry, again Salleh challenge the Hadiths and defend poetry.

*Did Muhammad really say that? Such silly
Words are not likely to be uttered by a man
Divinely blessed with the gift of prophecy.*

In explaining about love for Prophet Muhammad among Muslims in *As I Pleased*, Salleh says that each Muslim, depending on his imaginative capacity (or peculiarity), may treasure one particular name representing one aspect of the beloved prophet more than any other. The name or attribute of the prophet that he himself feels he has special something for is Kamil (Perfect). To Sufis, especially those influenced by the theosophy of the great 12th century Spanish-Arab mystic Ibn’Arabi’s, “Prophet Muhammad is the archetype of Perfect Man (as-Insan al-Kamil)” (114). In ‘Poetry and Pus’, Salleh believes that such silly words about poetry cannot be said by such a perfect man who is divinely blessed with the gift of prophecy.

In his defense of poets and poetry, Salleh invites the readers to read ‘poetry of the Persians –of hafiz and Khayam’ (Adam’s Dream, 24). In an article which was written by Salleh Ben Joned in *As I Please*, he admires writes, Major Muslim poets and Sufis like Rumi, al Halaj, al-Arabi, al-Junayed, Hafiz, Omar Khayam, and certainly that ‘blasphemously’ forthright and wine-besotted poet 8th century Baghdad, Abu Nuwas. Salleh believes all these major figures in Islamic literature were, in varying degrees and in one way or another, blessed with the ability to hear poetry’s other voice, and therefore, essentially heterodox. And being true to that other voice, the work of these poets and their thinking, reveals ‘hidden resemblances’ and affirms ‘harmony and concord’, and is therefore, True (i.e. Divine) Unity that transcends all decisive doctrines orthodoxies. Or, in other words, they affirm the spiritual brotherhood of (universal) man. He declares that” Within Islam, the Sufis understand these things better than the conservative “*Ulamas*” (79).

In *Nothing Is Sacred*, Salleh mentions these ideas clearly:

Writers, especially poets, are usually the people we can, or should be able to, count on to liberate us from the constrictions of rigid orthodoxies, protect us from their treacherous temptations. If the poet is truly religious and informed enough about other faiths, he is not likely to dismiss the claims of the latter out of hand. If he is, in one sense or another, inclined toward mysticism, or familiar with mystical traditions of the world’s major religions, he would concede that Truth or God is truly one, though there is more than one path to It (*Nothing Is Sacred*, 144).

In the last part of the poem Salleh says that Prophet Muhammad himself was ‘the Islam’s first poet’ and brings about prophet’s Hadith:

*“Perfume and women are to me very dear,
And coolness comes to my eyes in prayer.”*

In the “Women, Perfume and Prayer” which was written in *As I Please*, Salleh discusses this Hadith as his favourite one and called it “the most poetic of Hadiths” (115) and meditates on it based on Ibn’Arabi’s interpretation of this Hadith and thinking of Ibn’Arabi’s definition of prophet as *al-Insan al-Kamil* (Perfect Man). Salleh mentions that Ibn’Arabi’s interpretation of this Hadith is not exactly easy reading, or easy to explain in the limited space given to him. So he just quotes parts of the suggestive summary by the English translator of *Fusus al-Hikam*. The ‘perfume Hadith’ illustrates “the underlying theme of triplicity in singularity...this triplicity in singularity is...the two fundamental poles of the God-Cosmos polarity, the third factor of the relationship between the two, all three elements (i.e. women, perfume and prayer) being united in Oneness of Being.”(115). The first element of the triplicity, women, “represents the various aspects and nature of the cosmic pole, suggesting as it does multiplicity, nature, form, body, receptivity, fecundity, becoming, beauty, fascination...”(115)

According to Ibn’Arabi’s view of things, “the attracting beauty of women far from being a snare to delude man, should rather become for him that perfect reflection... of his own spiritual and truth, being, as she is, that quintessential sign or clue...from which he might best learn how to know his own truth self, which is in turn, to know his Lord. The second element is in the triplicity is, perfume, is a sort of connecting factor. And the last element, prayer, “symbolizes the Spirit and it’s reflection in man”; its purpose is to make man aware of God (116).

The second Section of Adam’s dream, “Family Fables”, contemplates poems that relate to the family. In the poem, “A Polyphonic Hymn to Polygamy”, Salleh shows his disgust of

one of the other Islamic traditions which is polygamy, based on one of the verses of the Quran:

“...then marry from among the (other) women
such as are lawful to you-(even) two, three or four...”

(The Quran, surah 'An-Nissa 3)

The poem is a story of a man's corruption who marries four women to complete his life. Then, he attempts to disguise his corruption with religion: “to claim his full rights as a Muslim man” (Adam's Dream, 62). The story ends in religious punishment when he is unable to fulfil his Hajj, “The fifth pillar of Islam” (Adam's Dream, 63), because the airport at Medina has been taken over by terrorists.

*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)*

Here Salleh highlights problems with a section of Muslims who take pride in their religion and yet indulge in things forbidden in religion such as promiscuity because they rationalise that at the end of the day they can perform the Hajj and everything is forbidden. Preservation of the Islamic laws is crucial to them but their understanding of those laws is shallow.

“In Memoriam”, the third section of *Adam's Dream*, serves as a platform for Salleh to address those who have shaped and influenced his life. The section ends with “Ana al Haq”, a poem dedicated to the Muslim apostate Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj. Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858 - March 26, 922) was a Persian mystic, revolutionary writer and pious teacher of Sufism most famous for his apparent, but disputed, self-proclaimed divinity, his poetry and for his execution for heresy at the orders of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir after a long, drawn-out investigation. Among other Sufis, al-Hallaj was an anomaly. Many Sufi masters felt that it was inappropriate to share mysticism with the masses, yet al-Hallaj openly did so in his writings and through his teachings. He began to make enemies. This was exacerbated by occasions when he would fall into trances which he attributed to being in the presence of God. During one of these trances, he would utter “An *āl-Haq*” “I am The Truth,” which was taken to mean that he was claiming to be God, since *al-Haq* “the Truth” is one of the Ninety Nine Names of Allah. In another controversial statement, al-Hallaj claimed “There is nothing wrapped in my turban but God,” and similarly he would point to his cloak and say, *Mā fī jubbatī illā l-Lāh* “There is nothing in my cloak but God”. These utterances led to a long trial, and his subsequent imprisonment for 11 years in a Baghdad prison. He was publicly crucified on March 26, 922.

This poem begins with the word “IRTADDA” (apostasy) which Salleh as a writer intrigued by this more than the other terrors of Muslim mind which are sacrilege, blasphemy, polytheism, and apostasy (As I Please, 77).

In one of the articles of *As I Please*, Salleh starts his discussion about apostasy with the Quranic statement, *La ikraha fī'din*, meaning “there is no compulsion in religion [al Baqarah, verse 256] (As I Please, 77). He confesses his lack of knowledge in Islamic theology but after coming across with some lines which attributed to Al Hallaj (“He (God) sees like an enemy but is a friend. I take His judgments very seriously. God says, you are not qualified, Hallaj but go), Salleh decides to go ahead and says what he wants to say any way.

Salleh claims that certain quarters will “claim that if the verse is read with historical circumstances or relation, it would be clear that ‘no compulsion refers to infidels, not

Muslim. In other words, God forbids conversion of infidels but once a person is Muslim, his renunciation of his faith is a criminal offence punishable by the state” (82). For Salleh, the same Quranic statement simply means that no one can be forced in either belief or disbelief, without any distinctions being made on whether one is an infidel or not. Salleh cannot construe that a believer of any religion can be existent in this world as an apostate, as though one does not remain loyal to his/her own religious group. He/she will still begin to adhere to the rules and regulations of the other religion of his/her choice. This causes Salleh to observe that, “for a non-atheist, there is no such thing as ‘apostasy’” (80). This being the case, he finds no ‘justification for making apostasy a criminal offence’ (82).

Salleh views religion as a benevolent and all embracing force of power, and not as a fearful and delicately force that would judge and regulate mankind harshly. Therefore, Salleh is convinced that, “nowhere is it suggested that the apostate-offender as such deserves to be executed. What is implied is divine punishment in the hereafter” (82). He is certain of this belief as a further line in the Quran indicates a freedom in religious belief. He says, “the unambiguity of the emphatic line for al-Baqarah is made even more unambiguous by lines like the following, ‘whosoever will, let him believe and whosoever will, let him disbelieve’ (al-Kahf, 29), ‘unto your religion and unto my religion’ [al-Kafiron] (82-83). He further explains that if in history an apostate (of Muslim faith) was slain, then the historical revelation must be taken into account” (83). An apostate at that time would join forces with enemy (naturally then of a differing religion), and would then on become a threat to the existence of Muslims. Therefore, he would be killed not so much for defecting from a particular religion as for preventing him from being lured into swelling the opposition army.

Quran, “specially guarantees Muslims liberty of beliefs, any act of apostasy is an affirmation of that liberty, and therefore, shouldn’t be punishable-by state or by any militant fanatic who appoints himself a guardian of the faith, and as guardian appropriates the function of god” (83). In fact, he even views apostasy as the practical usage of the “creative freedom sectioned by God himself” (84). Therefore, Salleh links apostasy to the freedom of the individual. For this writer, authentic religion is “true (i.e. divine) unity that transcends all divisive doctrines and orthodoxies. Or in other words, they affirm the spiritual brotherhood of (universal) man” (79). This statement implies that Salleh looks at religion as a force that would unite all the peoples.

He does not see the logic of diversifying religion and causing disharmony by doing so, and hence negating the very basis of religion as a tool to prorogate humanity, kindness, and hope for the destitute modern man. In Salleh concept religion should be a transcendental experience, which advocates peace, harmony, as actual truth remains elusive and can be deciphered completely only by God (89). Bearing this in mind Salleh claims that to have a death sentence pronounced upon a defector who becomes an apostate, causes the religion to become a symbol of terrorism in the hands of the religious fundamentalists.

3. Conclusion

In *Adams’ Dream* once again Salleh with his witty and ironic manner and his alleged audacity, plays and probes with religious issues, challenges, and its impact on Malaysian society, history, politics and women. He concludes his Preface to *Adam’s Dream*, with this mischievous statement: “I hope my *Adam’s Dream* won’t become their nightmare.” as a response to the reactions from the Malay literary community to his first collection of poetry, *Sajak-Sajak Salleh*.

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