

# The Quest for National Identity in Mohammad Hajji Salleh's Poetry

Khalil Hasan Nofal<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Philadelphia University, Jordan

Correspondence: Khalil Hasan Nofal, Department of English Language and Literature, Philadelphia University, Jordan. E-mail: [nofalkh1948@gmail.com](mailto:nofalkh1948@gmail.com) or [knofal@philadelphia.edu.jo](mailto:knofal@philadelphia.edu.jo)

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## Abstract

This paper examines the concept of national identity in the poetry of Mohammad Hajji Salleh, who left his homeland to live most of his life abroad in the Western world to begin a long quest for his national identity. In his poetry, Salleh described his exile, his remoteness from his homeland, his national identity, and the idea of his return. This paper critically analyses the poet's vision of his quest to construct his identity throughout various phases: roots and ancestors, traditions, values, culture, nature, language and literary heritage. That is to say, this paper aims to examine Salleh's poetry in the context of post-colonial literature, particularly his search for identity, the heritage of Malay literature, and his struggle to safeguard the Malay language.

**Keywords:** identity, roots, traditions, culture, language, nature, land, literary heritage

## 1. Introduction

Mohammad Hajji Salleh is a famous post-colonial Malaysian poet. Salleh is well-known for his passionate quest for his national identity. He devotes most of his time to searching for Malay identity. Salleh's poetry is nationalistic in its themes that have been considered communal centered. He increasingly identifies himself with the indigenous values of his Malay culture, language, and traditions that he had inherited, in addition to the interrelationship between man and nature which encapsulates the post-colonial quest for identity forming. The poet begins his journey back home searching for identity and roots. This quest is the distinctive mark of his poetry as reflected in his *Rowing Down Two Rivers*.

Salleh began writing poetry in English and later in Malay. He stopped writing poetry in English to return to his roots, traditions, literary heritage (which includes the collection and publication of classic pantun), and language which shows his commitment to his mother tongue and literature. This means that since switching to writing in Malay, he has started to talk about issues that are directly related to Malay community. When he was asked: "You write for yourself as much as about your people", "he answered: My poetry is communally—centered" (Fadilla in Zawiah, 2003, p. 15).

Moreover, Salleh is the poet of Malayness and the poet of the bigger world. When he was asked: "The theme of the quest for identity, of defining oneself, seems to be central to your poems in Malay and in English", he answered: "At the same time, having been a foreigner for such long time, I always had to define myself as Malaysian as well as citizen of a bigger world. But when one lives somewhere else, one searches hard for one's identity" (Yaapar, 2003).

## 2. Discussion and Analysis

Salleh's quest for identity is reflected in his poetry, particularly in his "*Si Tenggang's Homecoming*", "*Do not Say*", "*The Traveller*", "*Blood*", "*Seeds*", "*The Forest Last Day*", "*Tropics*" among others which portray Malay traditions, culture, values, nature, literary heritage, language, land, and roots and ancestors.

### 2.1 Traditions and Values, Culture, Roots and Ancestors

Mohammad Hajji Salleh writes poetry to portray "the traditions and importance of traditions, continuity, and pride of identity" of Malaysian nation (Fadilla in Zawiah, 2003, p. 16). Salleh wrote about the theme of seeking for his self-identity because he lived most of his life abroad and was influenced by the Western world, where he stayed for many years but he never forgot that he belonged to the Malay society, his mother tongue, and his homeland. His "*Si Tenggang's Homecoming*" portrays Malay traditions and values, and it is a reflection of Si Tenggang's experience as a traveler, who had been abroad for a while and returned to his homeland. Salleh in this poem is telling us that in

the process of discovering himself, he has not lost his sense of inheritance and roots. This can be easily seen through stanza 3:

### III

but look.

I have brought myself home,  
seasoned by confidence.  
broadened by land and language,  
I am no longer afraid of the oceans  
of the differences between people,  
no I easily snared  
by words or ideas.

the journey was a loyal teacher,  
who was never tardy  
in explaining cultures and variousness  
look , I am just like you.  
Still amalay,  
sensitive to what  
I believe is good,  
and more ready to understand  
from my older and younger brothers.  
And the contents of these boats are yours too,  
For I have returned.

In this stanza, the poet asserts that he is still Malay and has not turned his back to his people, his land, or his roots. He does not reject his community and its traditions. On the contrary, after being estranged for a long time, he came back eager to know the culture he had left behind and eager to know more about himself.

In stanza 4 of “*Si Tenggang’s Homecoming*”, Salleh uses symbols such as “village” and “ancestors” to refer to Si Tenggang’s Malay culture and roots. In this stanza, the returnee, Si Tenggang, emphasizes the fact that the Malay village is the place of and level for authentic ecocultural identity and ancestral Malayness. This shows his belonging to his homeland. See (Yeow, 2014, pp. 6-7).

### IV

travel makes me  
a seeker who does not take  
what is given without sincerity  
or that which demands payment from beliefs  
the years at sea and in coastal state  
have thought me to choose,  
to accept only those tested by comparison,  
or that which matches the roads of my **ancestors**,  
which returns me to my **village**  
and its perfection.

In fact, having been changed by time and place, the speaker declares paradoxically:

VI

I am not a new man,  
not very different  
from you;  
the people and cities  
of coastal ports  
thought me not to brood  
over a foreign world,  
suffer difficulties  
or fear possibilities.  
I am you,  
freed from the village,  
its soils and ways,  
independent, because  
I have found **myself**.

This shows how he sets free from the bonds of time and place and is yet sustaining his Malay identity. Moreover, in this stanza, the poet feels that his personality has been enriched by his experience overseas. He has become more confident. He has changed and chosen to come back home. What he has learnt from his travels has broadened his outlook and is therefore ready to share his knowledge with his people.

When Salleh was asked: "What is your view of tradition and modernization?", he answered: "Tradition is the roots of the great tree; it is nurtured by its special situation, condition and make-up. But of course even a tree changes and evolves, finding its place and special meaning in a changing situation. If it does not find this meaning it will become irrelevant. While having roots and traditions, I think writers must experiment with these traditions to enhance them, give them a new existence for the different and new generation". See (Quayum, 2006).

Muhammad Hajj Salleh is the poet of Malay-ness. His Malay-ness is expressed by Si Tenggang, the returnee of his "*Si Tenggang's Homecoming*" who came back to share his knowledge, his experience, and new values he acquired from his travels with his people.

III

look I am just like you ,  
still amalay,  
sensitive to what  
I believe is good,  
and more ready to understand  
from my older and younger brothers.  
and the contents of these boats are yours too,  
for I have returned.

In his "*Do Not Say*" where the colonial imagery is used and abused, the poet depicts his anger towards colonial oppression and asserts the aspects and the values of his national identity. Salleh challenges "the ontological and epistemological distinction between the "orient" and the "occident" (Said, 2003, p. 1) which has been used to define the identity of the colonizer and the colonized. The difference is crucial in such definition. As Hall, S.

argued (2007, p. 4) "identities are constructed through not outside difference. Therefore, the colonial ideology of derogation uses differences in order to set up "binary oppositions, such as the colonizer / colonized, civilized / primitive, or good / evil" (cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000, p. 19).

In order to subvert the colonial binary opposition, the poet uses the imperative mood to shock the addressee, the colonizer, and remind him constantly of the "do nots" of the colonized. The first line of each stanza urges the colonizer to change his mind. The colonizer should stop defining the colonized as what Hall (2007, p. 4) has defined as "narrativization of the self, that is, the construction of the self".

**do not say** my people are **lazy**,  
because you do not know.  
you are only a critic an looker.  
you cannot know or judge,  
passing the kampong in your car  
starting at the economic data.

**do not think** my people are **weak**,  
because they are gentle,  
because they do not build skyscrapers.

have you ever worked in a **ladang**,  
or danced the **ronggeng**?  
can you sing the **dongdang** saying?  
**do not think** that we have only **music**,  
because we love life.

**do not write** that we **have no literature, culture**,  
have you ever listened to the **sajak** or **pantun**  
stayed a night at the **bangsawan**.

have you read the **epic shairs**  
or the theological theses?  
how many times have you wondered about history in the blade  
and ancestry in the middle of the **keris**  
or felt the pattern of the **songket**?  
Have you lived a **kampong**?

**do not condemn** us as **poor**,  
because we have very few banks.  
see, here the richness of our people,  
the brimful hearts that do grab or grapple.  
we collect humanity from sun and rain and man,  
transcending the business and the money.

**do not tell** us how to live

or organize such nice associations and bodies.

our society was an entity

**before the advent of political philosophy.**

**do no say—**

because you do not know.

One of the most obvious means of occidental defining is “naming” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000, p. 165) which can be seen in the stereotypical and derogatory adjectives and phrases such as “lazy”, “weak” “have no literature, culture”, and “poor”, which form denominators in the colonial binary opposition.

Salleh in this poem, uses Malay words such as “ladong” (non- irrigated farming), “ronggeng” and “dondang” (local music), “sajak” and “pantun” (local verse), “bangswan”, “epic shairs” (opera), the keris (dagger), all of which are used as examples of the native heritage to convey that Malay cultural distinctiveness can portray Malay national identity. Through these words Saleh asserts that the Malay people have their own distinctive culture “before the advent of political philosophy” (imperialism).

In his poem “**Blood**”, Salleh talks about the inherent bond between Malay ancestors and their natural surroundings. Moreover, the poet is trying to portray entanglement of race and place in terms of blood ties, unbroken lineage and communal piety. See (Yeow, 2014, p. 13).

the blood in me has travelled the centuries  
 flowed in unknown veins  
 crossed swampy rivers and proud straits  
 the loins that have borne my beginnings  
 stood in their past.  
 the great-grandfather who walked in piety  
 had filtered his purity into his dutch- hating son  
 who walked with him and with god.  
 they dominated their communities and traditions,  
 purified the ancestral mud to clean earth  
 and grew in its clutch children of faith  
 much as i owe, i am.  
 i am both branch  
 and remote stalk of this tree.

Lawrence (2005, p. 68) suggests that the environmental responsibility does not come with long -term residence in a place. He points out “that people carry their places with them wherever they go and that human adaptability suggests that new houses can be found anywhere in the world”. This means that if people do not live in their land, their land live within them.

## 2.2 *Belonging to Homeland*

Salleh’s “**The Traveler**” reflects his life in the village and in the city. Salleh himself needs to travel to the city as it provides him with better view, broadens his mind, and where he gets new knowledge and experience. In this poem, the persona emotionally wants to explore the link between his identity and the city on the one hand, and between his identity and the village (his homeland) on the other. This can be seen in stanza 1:

I  
 for i am only a traveler finding my way  
 among the streets of your new town,

i have other places to go to.  
i shall someday work out a map of this city  
and traverse it on foot, someday.  
for i am only a traveler, and cannot stay longer  
where there is no home.

The poet sees the city as a source of wealth, comfort, and entertainment. For example, high buildings, modern technology, vehicles among other things give him pleasure. That is, why he moves from the village to the city. But at the end he discovers that he is totally wrong. This can be seen in stanza 2 below:

II  
take my love while you can, take my hatred,  
take my weathered hand if you will,  
for i shall have no home here,  
among the dull buildings  
where the heart cannot stay.  
for i am only a traveler  
on my way, to somewhere further than here.

The poet cannot find his sense of belonging in the city, i.e., he feels that he lacks emotional belonging in the city:

III  
this is the city that broke my heart,  
that stole my feelings from me;  
this is the city that took away my love,  
that told me i must go away.  
i must go somewhere.  
somewhere, where they can know me;  
can recognize that i am a man.

The city has taken away his manhood and his self-identity, so finally he recognizes that the village is his homeland and the place to belong to and where his roots are. Therefore, he chooses to go back to his village and settle down there where he can find himself and his roots:

IV  
some night when the city is asleep  
i'll walk out quietly along your cruel streets  
through the suburban edge and into the dawn forests.  
somewhere, perhaps near where the sun rises,  
i can sit down,  
and sometimes perhaps, i can tell myself,  
here i am a man.

The village in this poem in particular and in his poetry in general refers to Malay culture and roots. This poem can be seen as a metaphor, mainly presenting the journey of a man who is looking for his identity. After a long absence Salleh has become very different. Yet he is still Malay. This is what he expresses in his “*Pulang*” (*Return*).

this return is the existence  
and setting  
that bring back  
that questions and problems.  
Arriving  
I return  
bound to the values  
and the ways  
return a Malay  
rooted  
budding  
or fragmented.  
This return  
is to self  
and home,  
nation and its people.  
this return  
accepts and  
grows.

Salleh strongly believes that his people have roots and originate in a place identified as Malay. This indicates that Malay people immemorially have intimate relations with land. Salleh is invoking Malay ancestral links to land. This shows how the commune peasants are strongly tied to their land and particularly to their “sawah” (wet rice fields). See (Kahn, 2006, p. xii). In the same poem above he says:

Once again a malay,  
I rooted, secured by values,  
ways

To become “once again a malay” indicates that Malay identity is eternal and does not change, and that anyone could return to it any time and find it the same.

### *2.3 Interrelationship between Man and Nature*

Salleh mostly writes in a nostalgic vein when he talks about the relationship between Malay people and nature. Salleh’s unique treatment of nature from an aesthetic and ecological viewpoint is an aspect of his belonging to his homeland. As a poet, he is highly influenced by the unique nature of his homeland and its beauty. For him, everything is poetic including all aspects of Malaysian nature. This kind of interrelationship between man and nature can be clearly traced in his poem “*Seeds*” where he says:

These seeds in the hope-bowel of my palms  
I wet with water of the new season.

In my grasp i feel their skins burst and slap my hands

**Yellow shoots creeping into my blood.**

Now as I drop them into

Morning earth, **they are plants within me,**

Growing on my blood and my sweatbelt.

Indeed Salleh artistically establishes deep interrelation between him and nature when he uses the images of “yellow shoots creeping into my blood”, and “they are plants within me”. This means that his identity is linked to the seeds that are growing in his blood and body.

His interrelationship with nature transcends the limit of physical environment and becomes emotional as can be seen in the following lines:

I flow with the youth of my blood,

Fall in love with the seasons

Evenings and the mornings

Nature me

Penetrate my fruits

**And return me to new blood.**

These lines reveal Salleh’s ecological consciousness. He has shared a close and intimate relationship and love with nature that takes care of him, provides him with values and new life “And returned me to my blood”.

In his “*The Forest Last Day*”, Salleh presents nature with its details when he depicts the various elements of the forest such as the different Malaysian trees: **cengal**, **merants**, **merbau**, **pulai**... among others:

Fallen is the **cengal**

Fallen is the **merants**

Fallen is the **merbau**

Fallen is the **pulai**

Fallen is **seraya**

Fallen is the **resak**

Fallen is the **balban**

Fallen is the **nibung**

Fallen is the **rattan**

By using Malay words to identify Malaysian trees, the poet reminds us of the uniqueness of their forests and how these trees fall victims to human actions as can be seen in the following lines:

The frame of balance is broken, since trees became earth

The quiet beauty filtered by the light fades out

Leaves are dumb, branches speechless, no song, and no echo

No deer, no baboon, no elephant herd

No pulse of mouse deer’s bleat, no question

This indicates that nature of all components of nature fall victims to man tyranny and destruction. It means that



the whole ecosystem of nature in these forests is disturbed by human actions. That is to say, the interference of man into nature results into much disruption of the relationship between man and nature. The tendency of man to log trees in Malaysian forests is an example in the concluding lines:

And a bloated logger  
Who stands on **the red desiccated desert**  
The world of future

The image of “the red desiccated desert” reveals Salleh’s sense of ecological consciousness and serves as an environmental cry and warning to Malay people to stop deconstructing nature. Salleh warns his people to stop the ill-treatment of nature which leads to extinction of plants and animals. In the opening lines of this poem, he says:

Death comes at the end of the chain saw  
With spears of shriek that spilt the air and red of the sun  
**Biting into the flesh of wood.**

These lines reveal the cruelty of man towards nature when using his machinery to destroy the forest. This is evoked from the image “biting into the flesh of wood”. He contrasts the annihilation of nature to the time when the ecosystem of the environment is in harmony with other creatures.

In its canopy birds still play  
Its air made fragrant by the essence of the forest  
The sky is the witness clear eyes.

In his poem “**tropics**”, Salleh tries to emphasize the fact that tropical nature and Malayness have significantly contributed to the notion of unchanging traditional Malay ecological identity. Salleh’s depiction of brown people attune to their natural surroundings:

but the beach is the brown people’s home,  
**their traditions**  
**engraved by every tide.**  
they speak the language of the sea  
birds and earth, praying only to their own God,  
here,  
they still dance and sing graceful  
and share their love in the neighborhood.  
**each tide washes the earth and**  
**dead leaves from their backs.**

The expression “their tradition engraved by every tide” indicates that the established traditions are influenced and determined by the place i.e., the sea. However the tide can easily erase all marks made in the sand in the same way that it “washes the earth and dead leaves from their backs.” The image suggests the ebb and flow of identity. Accordingly, Salleh is warning his people to inscribe their traditions and not to be erased or transformed. See (Yeow, 2014, p. 12).

#### *2.4 Language and Literary Heritage*

As mentioned earlier, Mohammad Hajji Salleh is well-known for his passionate research for identity, his love of language, and legacy of his literary heritage. He started writing poetry in English and later in Malay. He stopped

writing in English to return to his roots and traditions, and he committed himself to Malay language and literature. “English colonized me, yet it was my lifeblood. I constantly reminded myself and was reminded to think, to write, to feel in my mother tongue, for my people”. See (Salleh, 2012, p. 274).

For Salleh, English was the language of the colonials who had caused the marginalization of his mother tongue. In an essay entitled “Code: One Colonial Language, One Great Tragic Epic”, Salleh emphasizes his view “I sleep easier for not being a betrayer of the language of my forefathers, and of the heritage that they have bequeathed me and of which it was my duty to prolong”. See (Salleh, 2012, p. 274).

When he was asked “Why did you choose to write in English? Why did you give up writing in English and take to writing in Bahasa Malaysia in the 70s?”, he answered “My first poem was in English, but a few weeks after that I began to write also in Malay, perhaps as a result of a kind of guilt, or of reflection of the split and eventual coexistence of the two languages within myself, one, the language of my mother and father, and the other, a colonial language, forced upon me”. See (Quayum, 2006).

Finding his identity and rejecting the colonizer only are not enough. Most important is his effort to nourish and sustain the treasury of his heritage. Salleh has made several successful efforts. As a poet, he has skillfully expressed several events or stories from *Sulalat Al Salatin* (The Malay Annals), *Sajak-Sajak Sejarah Malaya* (Poems from the Malay Annals) in which he authored 34 tales from the classics- Particularly relevant are some lines from the first poem in his collection” **Mukadima:** (preface):

Aged chief, treasurer TunMamat  
fashion our history, o master,  
history of the Malays and all their islands,  
take me back to the lofty peak of Siguatang  
to the seas across,  
Java in the southeast, the Bugis riding the waves,  
to the people in paddy- fields, jungles and sands.

The master, great scholar and writer,  
his work is heavy, must be safeguarded,  
language and chronology of events,  
greatness of nation and human conscience,  
yet greatest of all,  
speak of the truth,  
for truth is the material of history  
corrector of kings reminder of the forgetful  
guide of the truthful  
and unbroken by blows.

This extract beautifully resonates with the king’s command to his treasurer who is a great scholar and writer, to produce the work that is now known as “**The Malay Annals**”. In fact, the message to compose is not limited only to the treasure. It may be perceived that Salleh has engaged himself in as a great Malay scholar and writer.

### 3. Findings and Conclusion

Mohammad Hajji Salleh lived most of his life abroad, but never forgot that he belongs to Malaysia, his homeland, his mother tongue, his traditions, his culture, his roots and ancestors, nature, and literary heritage through which he expressed his passionate quest for his national identity. From his poetry in general and the poems discussed in particular, it can be easily seen how Salleh conveys the theme of questing for his national identity.

Salleh uses nature, the unique Malaysian fauna and flora, to extend his connections between land and identity to highlight the relationship between man and nature, which is central to the field of ecocriticism that should be

kept in all Malaysian people. Finally, Salleh's poetry depicts his efforts to search for identity, to sustain Malay literary heritage and poetics to safeguard his language, searching for roots, culture, traditions, and identity.

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