

THE SACRED PROFANE IN THE POETRY OF SALLEH BEN JONED

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Despite Salleh ben Joned's status as an important Malaysian poet, well-versed in two languages, his work has for a long time received critical neglect due to its blasphemous and vulgar nature. This essay is an attempt at reappraising his work in order to appreciate the mechanisms of profanity on which many of his poems are premised; I argue, drawing on the insights of philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, that rather than opposed to the sacred, profanity in Salleh's poem actually enables a regeneration of the former by compelling readers to reassess their faith, and to reconsider the body and the sexual act as sanctified. My view is that what fundamentally discourages readers is not so much the presence of profane terms and near-sacrilegious declarations in the poems, but the offensive tone in them that is only tangentially related to profanity.

Keywords: Salleh ben Joned, abject, profanity, sacred, poetry, offensiveness

The Malaysian poet Salleh ben Joned occupies a unique place in the literary imagination of the nation. Not only is he one of the very few Malay writers who refused (and still refuses) compliance with the state's move to elevate the status of *bahasa Malaysia* (or the Malay language) as the national language and medium for national literature during the late 1970s and early 1980s, he is also infamous for his explicit use of graphic sexuality, profanity and blasphemy in his poems and essays. As a member of the dominant racial group in Malaysia, which grants him *bumiputera* (literally "son" or "prince of the soil") status and establishes his Muslim identity, Salleh's deliberate transgression of religious, political and cultural boundaries in his poetry would, understandably, discomfit many Malay-Muslim readers and critics. In fact, Muhammad Haji Salleh, who was National Laureate when Salleh's debut collection, the bilingual *Sajak Sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane* (2002), was published, declared it as "the most traumatic experience for the Malay literary scene."¹ But Salleh's notoriety is not only confined to his writings. In 1974, he publicly urinated at the inauguration of an art exhibition, which he claimed in an open letter to the press was meant as an act of criticism against the exhibition's affectation, and to affirm the power of art to disturb and destabilize the status quo.² Unsurprisingly then, despite his importance in the canon of anglophone Malaysian literature, there has been almost no scholarship devoted to his work. To my knowledge, only Adibah Amin

has written a critique of Salleh's poetry, but from the perspective of a journalist, while Lim Chee Seng's scholarly article mentions him merely in passing.³ Considered an anomaly that revels in perversion and profanities, and coupled with the fact that poetry is not much read by the Malaysian public, Salleh's work has remained a marginal and sadly neglected facet of the richness of postcolonial Malaysian literature.

Recently, however, there has been a revival in interest in his work. A new collection of poems, *Adam's Dream*, was published by the local English-language publisher Silverfish Books in 2007, and *Poems Sacred and Profane* was reissued a year later by the same publisher. It may be a coincidence that they occurred almost concurrently with an important political shift in Malaysia in 2008,⁴ but their publication seems almost prescient. Salleh's poems often reveal and undermine the ideological straitjackets that, at various times, have incited racial divisions, encouraged religious bigotry and extremism, and galvanized political tergiversations. Adibah Amin, who reads Salleh astutely sympathetically, is certainly correct when she states that at the heart of his poetry is the "search for truth and beauty which for him mean life in all its variety and mystery."⁵ His poems may, on surface reading, sound carnal and irreverent, but their point is to restore a vital appreciation of human oneness as flesh *and* spirit, and to expose the fault-lines of ideological apparatuses disguised in religious, patriotic and/or racial garbs. Modern art is a vital means for expressing freedom and individuality, and Salleh's lampooning of what many Malaysians would term "sensitive" issues, such as *bumiputera* privileges, the supremacy of Islam, and the status of the national language, is his way of affirming his prerogative as an artist. That Malaysia's democratic stance is increasingly under siege by certain powerful but self-serving factions is echoed in several of his poems, but Salleh's work remains largely unfazed by this anxiety.

It is therefore timely that Salleh's work is finally given the attention it rightly deserves, and this essay is a modest contribution to what, I hope, will be a growing pool of scholarship dedicated to this unorthodox and fascinating poet. While my perspectives echo Adibah Amin's appraisal, my aim is to reconsider the notions of profanity and blasphemy in Salleh's poems. Two trajectories undergird my discussion. The first is a meditation on the use of profanity and its place within the symbolic system of language. I argue that the aesthetics motivating such linguistic irreverence is its capacity to compel interpretation (that is, to see such signifiers as meaning something beyond their literal reference) precisely *because* it perturbs the reader. Profane words or ideas either encourage a rereading for alternative, "deeper" meaning(s), failing which is the abortion (dismissal, condemnation) of interpretation altogether. The second part of my essay reconsiders the use of profanity itself. Contrary to the commonplace view that the profane is diametrically opposed to the sacred, the philosopher Giorgio

Agamben, in his essay, *In Praise of Profanation*, has convincingly demonstrated that only through the profane is the sacred reached. In Agamben's meditation, it is not the profane that undermines religion, but institutionalized religion and its version of religiosity. Agamben's argument carries important resonance when applied to Salleh's poems. The explicit references to carnal desires in them may be metaphors for spiritual experience,⁶ but they are also the medium by which the spiritual becomes *meaningfully* human, and not something removed and abstracted from the human sphere.

This, however, directly begs an important question: there may be value in considering Agamben's view when reading Salleh, but in the end, does profanity (at least in Salleh's poems) actually serve the ends Agamben postulates? In an act of deconstructive reading, the final section and conclusion of my essay will demonstrate that deploying profanity and blasphemy to make a religious or political point may prove self-defeating. They may be useful as a shock tactic and an invitation to read deeper into the poem, but after a point, they inevitably assume a patronising tone. Salleh's work is sometimes precariously tilted on the balance between sounding profound and condescending, a disjunction which, unfortunately, often defuses the force of his artistic objectives.

A final note before I begin my discussion: it is important to emphasize that despite the frequent use of "profanities" throughout this essay – an inevitability when considering Salleh ben Joned's work – it is directly in relation to my interpretation of his poems. This is undertaken in order for me to elucidate the manifold ways in which Salleh's use of such linguistic aberrations can shed light to the ideological premises underlying his work. As such, my essay should be read as fundamentally a critical enterprise in literary analysis for purposes of stimulating thought and discussion. I hope that my reader will approach this essay with this spirit of intellectual enquiry.

SITUATING SALLEH BEN JONED

To appreciate Salleh's notoriety as a writer in Malaysia requires an understanding of the socio-political contexts of the time he was actively writing. These contexts may have undergone some shifts in the last two decades, but their influence on the country's cultural scene is still felt today and is difficult to surmount. Locating Salleh's work in the nation's fraught ideological climate in the 70s and 80s will attune the reader to the issues with which Salleh is especially uncomfortable, and against which he aims his barbed poetry.

Although *bahasa Malaysia* became the national language according to the country's Constitution in 1967, it is the years between 1969 and 1971 which

constituted "the watershed in language and literary development in several senses."⁷ The country's only racial riot in 1969 pushed for subsequent national security and economic policies that would culminate in the supremacy of the Malays (who would later call themselves *bumiputeras* to consolidate their claim⁹) and the minoritization of the Chinese and the Indians. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was thereafter launched (1971) to redress the socio-economic imbalance amongst the different ethnic groups, and to put into place affirmative action to alleviate poverty, promote nationalism, and strengthen *bumiputera* rights, and thus directly position "the Malays as the dominant group, while assuring that minority groups' rights, beliefs and ways of life remain unthreatened."⁸ In the next twenty years, however, the NEP increasingly infiltrated every facet of Malaysian life, directly and indirectly threatening precisely those "rights, beliefs and ways of life" of the minority groups that the policy was meant to protect in the first place. *Bumiputeras* were obviously privileged in various ways to the extent that the peripheral status of minority groups became actual expressions of repression.¹⁰ Although the NEP was officially abolished in 1990 (it was replaced by the New Development Policy), it remains an irrefutable fact that the policies introduced by the NEP continue to inform the socio-economic ethos of Malaysia even up until today.

One of the moves to further strengthen *bumiputera*-Malay dominance by the NEP was the passing of the Constitutional Amendment Act in 1971, which made it illegal to question the status of the national language. A year before this, the government-sponsored Federation of National Writers (Gabungan Penulis Nasional, or GAPENA) was formed with the primary aim of initiating and organizing literary and cultural activities in Malaysia. An especially important agenda is the establishment of Malay literature and culture as the basis for a national culture. These concerted moves by the government resulted in two related consequences: languages other than Malay were (and still are) relegated to secondary status; and, for a creative work to qualify as "national literature", it must be written in the Malay language. The consequences of these developments were soon apparent: writers who persisted in crafting in English – many of whom were non-Malays and non-*bumiputeras* – saw their work sidelined in terms of public and academic interest, and unrecognized as legitimate creative expressions of national worth. Such writers were forced into a "diasporic" condition within their homeland,¹¹ and their work subscribed to being "written in virtual absence of a local audience and with little more than a small body of sympathetic commentary supporting it in belated fashion from outside."¹² As a result, many writers chose either to temporarily abandon writing, such as Lloyd Fernando (whose two novels were separated by a period of 17 years), or "to migrate and live in 'voluntary exile,'" such as the poets Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim.¹³

The dilemma is further complicated if the writer is also Malay. In privileging the English language, she is already implying an ambivalent adherence to her ethnic identity and, curiously, religion. This is because religion and race are powerfully and symbiotically yoked in Malaysia, and to be Malay is *ipso facto* to be Muslim. Thus, race, religion and language become complementary components that identify the individual in the complex socio-ideological landscape of the nation, each reinforcing the other. Unsurprisingly, there were very few Malay anglophone writers during this period. Those who did write in English often hailed from middle-class backgrounds and were Western-educated and therefore more critical of the nation's existing socio-political ideologies. Salleh is one such writer. For him, the concept of a "national literature" is, to say the least, preposterous, for "[to] insist on a National Literature is to betray a fundamental lack of understanding of what literature is all about."¹⁴ A fierce opponent against the state's policies on language and education, Salleh has consistently defended the importance of the English language in the Malaysian socio-cultural landscape. Its capacity to cross ethnic and cultural borders and its rich tradition of celebrating profanity as an artistic expression,¹⁵ are two fundamental reasons, which drive Salleh's insistence. An appreciation of the latter will henceforth be the focus of this essay.

THE PROFANE AS SUBJECT IN LANGUAGE

The profane proliferates in Salleh's poems. Take for example these two stanzas from *A Polyphonic Hymn to Polygamy*, a poem which focuses on the contentious issue of polygamy.¹⁶ In stanza seven, the persona, having procured wife number three, proceeds to consolidate their union thus:

That he knew would seal her happy acceptance
Of his proposal that she be his third wife
The gift took the form of an instant fuck
That she somehow felt like an act of romance.

The last stanza is a humorous, if tragic, end to the persona's polygamous quest when his flight on the way to Medina to meet wife number four is hijacked and obliterated 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.

A practice that has caused considerable consternation amongst the Malay womenfolk, polygamy in Malaysia is nevertheless stubbornly upheld by a religious authority heavily inflected by patriarchy.¹⁷ Although the Quran specifies the circumstances under which polygamy is allowed,¹⁸ the practice, as the poem suggests, has all too often been abused in order to justify male lust. Here, I want to draw attention to the two instances in which "fuck" is used. Often associated with vulgarity, the term, in the poem's context, succeeds in exposing with stark immediacy the motivation underlying the exploitation of this practice. If it sounds offensive, the term also effectively brings to fore the fact that what is vulgar is lust robed in religiosity, and the most vulgar of all – the Muslim who lives by it. This point is unmistakably established in the last stanza when "fuck" is used as an adjective to describe the man. In juxtaposing "fucking mad" with "holy-minded," the poem reflects the persona's duplicity, which he believes is warrantable by his beliefs.

The poem *Haram Scarum* may be devoid of linguistic profanities,¹⁹ but it nevertheless gestures toward the profane in its constant references to the pig, an animal regarded as unclean in Islam. The following are the last three stanzas (4–6):

We'll go the whole hog if we must
to redeem our pride as a race;
Like the giddy hare in a rut,
We'll *halal* everything save that.²⁰

It's hogwash what those swines say:
That we Bumis mount pig-a-back,
Like a pack of boars hacking our way
up the slippery slope of success.

Our one dislike we have to keep
to preserve our identity;
So long as we hate pork and pray,
We'll remain Moslem and Malay.

On the whole, the poem's tone is clearly ironic in its barbed criticism against the belief that as long as a Muslim repudiates pork and performs his prayers, his indulgence in activities like "drinking, gambling, lying, bribery/and all kinds of whoring too" are "all of them perfectly okay" (stanza 1, ll. 1–3). The poem intimates, however, that such a stance actually makes the Muslim even more repulsive than the animal. By projecting uncleanness to the animal, the Muslim can safeguard his affiliation with the sacred, when in truth, *it is he* who is unclean. As with *A Polyphonic Hymn to Polygamy*, in *Haram Scarum*, the

propensity to define something as profane often disguises the fact that the one doing the defining is even more desecrated. In persistently reinforcing the "piggish" feature of such a hypocritical stance, the poem's inclination towards profanity helps to drive home its point more effectively than any well-meaning homilies precisely because its discomfiting effect compels interpretive reaction.

Profanity, as a linguistic performance, occupies an interesting position in the symbolic system of language: although it is part of the system, its presence is usually registered with trepidation and embarrassment, and should therefore be avoided. The use of vulgar terms tends to provoke disgust and identify their users as uncouth, offensive and/or rude. Of course, what is considered profane is very much determined by cultural specificity, as evident in *Haram Scarum*. In this poem, the word "pig" is largely avoided (except for a single instance), but thanks to the richness of synonyms in the English language, it is easily substituted to establish the poem's point.²¹ Evidently then, the relationship between profanity and the symbolic system of language is, at best, an ambiguous one. Although the former constitutes part of the latter, its position is often perceived as troubling. And when evoked in art, which is traditionally associated with the beautiful and the orderly and which functions within certain cultures as a handmaiden to religion, profanity can be startling and powerfully disquieting because it confuses the distinction between art and pornography, aesthetics and ugliness.²²

A useful way to think about profanity's relationship to the symbolic system of language is through Kristeva's concepts of the "sign" and the abject.²³ Although Kristeva formulated them separately and, as far as I know, has never attempted to relate them, they are nevertheless implicitly connected. In *Desire in Language*, she contends that a sign (a unit in discourse) has vertical and horizontal functions, both of which are diametrically opposed to each other. Its vertical function *concretely* links the signifier to a specific signified to preclude any other signifieds from the equation (the sign is "transcendentalized and elevated to the level of a theological unity," making it "immediately perceptible").²⁴ Its horizontal function undermines this by disrupting the signifier's fixity and opening it up to variegated signifieds. When this happens, the sign encourages "*a progressive creation of metaphors*" and invites multiple interpretations.²⁵ In the process, the sign becomes irreducible to any single, absolute meaning.

Possibly because of the sign's inherent instability, the presence of profanity in discourse is unsettling. Profane terms are offensive, but it is often what they instigate, rather than what they actually mean, that makes them so. Because profanities go beyond their referential meaning, they are provocative, embarrassing and discomfiting. In *Haram Scarum*, the sign "fuck" is obviously a derogatory term for copulation, but when used to describe the polygamous Muslim, it becomes a pointed instrument to expose an otherwise noble practice in

Islam that has unfortunately been abused by some of its adherents. Similarly, the concreteness of "pig" as a signified becomes, in Salleh's poem, a metaphor that redirects the reader's attention from the *haram* animal to an even more *haram* creature: the Muslim who believes that avoiding the animal will render all his other sins void.

Kristeva views all signs as internally contradicting, for they simultaneously stabilize and destabilize discourse, paradoxically transfixing their signifiers' objectivity and refusing them closure. But while signs carry this oppositional characteristic, only profane signs that possibly encompass an abject dimension as well. For unlike other signs, the surplus quality of profanity is able to collapse distinctions and affect reversals, turning black into white and vice versa. The abject, as Kristeva famously states, subsists on an unclear "frontier" of all symbolic systems,²⁶ and from that vantage point, "disturbs identity, system, order" because it "does not respect borders, positions, rules."²⁷ Similarly, the profane is located in an indeterminate place within discursive practices, including art and literature. Its articulation generally already provokes uneasy feelings, but when used to point out defects in ideological systems that are sacrosanct (or worse, aligning the sacrosanct to the profane itself), its abject dimension becomes dangerously evident. In transgressing into and contaminating revered spaces, the profane vexes them by questioning their ideological premise and undermining their certainty. Such a characteristic of the profane is certainly evident in Salleh's poems, as I have so far demonstrated in my discussion.

But Salleh's use of profanity is never directed at Islam as a faith. Instead, his poems often target an Islam that has become institutionalized and politicized to such an extent that facets otherwise acceptable and celebrated by the faith have become, as a result, debased and tabooed (for example, sex as a means by which the believer's *physical and spiritual* affinity with the divine is enhanced). As such, rather than contesting the sacred, Salleh's profanity actually emphasises a sphere of the sacred that has become marginalized for reasons known only to the nation's religious policemen. The poem *Infinite Orgasm*, as a case in point, revels in the belief that the Islamic paradise (*syurga*),²⁸ unlike Christianity's concept of a sexless heaven, actually accentuates sensual pleasures: "Infinite orgasm? Eternal erection?/Each climax's extended and extended" (stanza 1, ll. 1–2). Although the poem is replete with the word "fuck", which gives it an offensive tone, its point is that, "When I fuck I only know one kind of fuck" (stanza 7, l.1). Whether sensual delight derived from carnal desires, or the result of paradisiacal attainment, sex is precisely that: sex – a gratification experienced through the medium of the body. Fuck may be an odious term, but as an abject sign, it demolishes the border that attempts to differentiate earthly (and therefore carnal) desire from heavenly (and therefore spiritual) pleasure. In this way, the term complicates any neat distinctions between the sacred and the profane, and redeems the debased for

divine ends. If sex, as the poem implies, is reward for being a good Muslim man, why is it tabooed from the discourse and practice of religious authorities, rendering its very enunciation embarrassing, shameful and sometimes even sinful?

RETHINKING PROFANITY

Many of Salleh's poems signal the profane through explicit, even obscene, sexual images. While there are exceptions like "Ria" and the ironically titled "Obscenity" (both dwell on the erotic without inferring the vulgar),²⁹ his poems about sex are generally replete with terms and descriptions that would disgust many readers. Take for example the first stanza of *A Hymn to My Sarong*.³⁰ As the reader is directed to the sarong's erotic qualities, she begins to see that the apparel, instead of covering the body (especially the private areas), actually reinforces the wearer's sensuality. The covert way in which the garment can both expose and hide the poet's "marvelous golden mangoes" and his "rump", has suddenly transformed a familiar, well-regarded clothing amongst the Malay community into a sexual fetish. Arguably, the poem is perhaps more mischievous than profane in tone, and only a conservative reader would possibly take offence. But conservatism aside, his poems are sometimes unpleasant because they frame carnal acts and desires against a religious, or religious-oriented, background. To his Muslim critics, this is a direct affront to their beliefs.

In sonnets like *The Woman Who Said No*, *The Woman Who Said Yes*, and *The Crescent*,³¹ all of which reference Islam in less than subtle ways, Salleh's profanity distinctly verges on the blasphemous. *The Woman Who Said No* suggests that the Prophet Muhammad (who remains unnamed in the poem) is the product of his father's lust. Overcome by desire, the latter pays a visit, unwashed and begrimed, to one of the "woman of his harem" to satiate it, and "Thus a prophet was conceived in the gust of lust/springing from the Omnipotent, earthy in its thrust" (ll. 13–14). In *The Woman Who Said Yes*, the Prophet himself struggles against an "apparition" (l. 11) of desire, and out of desperation cries out "Cover me, Khatijah," in order to establish if carnality is "Devil or angel" (l. 9).³² Only when the "act" is consummated does the apparition "[withdraw] with angelic tact" (l.11), after which his "prophethood" (l. 12) is confirmed. The poem is apparent in its suggestion that even the prophet is not above base needs; like any other man, he is sometimes engulfed by lust, which necessitates rescue from his wife. Finally, in *The Crescent*, a symbol commonly associated with Islam is likened to the shape of a woman's breast:

This mark of your being hardens my faith;
It bears runic message from the womb of fate:
"O crescent of good and of guidance
my faith is in Him who created thee."

In this *hijrah* to the heights of freedom,³³
You are the sign of my true kingdom come.

Deploying the crescent to imply the female anatomy is already suggestively profane, but to draw a parallel between erection and faith, and between *hijrah* and orgasm, verges on blasphemy. Features otherwise revered in Islam are, according to one reading, mocked and trivialized. Likewise, in the other two sonnets, the unsavoury circumstances within which the Prophet is depicted could potentially brand them blasphemous if not for the fact that sex and sensuality are not viewed, unlike in Christianity, as abhorrent in Islam.

Salleh's brazenness can be read, on the one hand, as calculated shock in order to "traumatize" his readers; on the other however, such a display of irreverence also serves to reclaim "for the use and property of men" that which has been wrested from them by religious officialdom.³⁴ According to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, it is not the profane but institutionalized religion which ensures that "men and gods [...] remain distinct":

It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine, therefore, that stand in opposition to religion, but "negligence", that is, a behavior that is free and "distracted" (that is to say, released from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use.³⁵

For Agamben, the profane encourages negligence or abandonment of religious norms so that a deeper experience of the divine becomes possible. It re-enchants for the believer what has otherwise been "separated and petrified" by institutionalized religion.³⁶ Agamben's position is an interesting one because it suggests that rather than being opposed to the sacred, the profane is, in truth, a profound conduit that reconnects "men and gods" by deconstructing religion. Following this logic, the sacred is the "new happiness" offered by the profane to the people, one that is restored to its purity, innocence and enchantment "without [...] abolishing" the divine.³⁷ This last point is important; when religion becomes institutionalized, it loses its sacred dimension because it limits the spiritual experiences that can be found through other human endeavors, such as art and sex. In violating the boundaries erected by religion, the abject-profane not only

redeems the sacred for the people, but restores enchantment to these other spheres as well. This not only enhances the believer's appreciation of the sacred, but enables the divine to take multifarious and equally meaningful forms.

In many ways, Salleh's poems are aimed at enacting such a perspective. Sex is a means by which the body as a divine gift becomes enhanced. Physical intimacy attained through the act is undeniably spiritual, because it encourages a deeper appreciation for each other, and a feeling of gratitude to God for bringing the two individuals together. In this sense, I see Salleh's poem as echoing Georges Bataille's equation of sanctity with eroticism. Sex, for Bataille, is a profoundly spiritual experience because it involves a communion that renders two persons completely vulnerable to each other. As a result, they transcend the ideological limitations that have marked their embodied selves, and in the act of union, dissolve them.³⁸ Bataille aptly sees sex as promoting "an exuberance of life;"³⁹ the exposure of one's nakedness to another is not only a sign of trust but "offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence [...]. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self."⁴⁰ Clearly, sex for is no different from a religious experience for Bataille: both motivate the subject to overcome the limitations of "self" in order to attain something higher and timeless. When reading Salleh's poems from this perspective, it is arguable that his use of profanity is aimed at reclaiming a religion that encourages greater vitality and a more meaningful experience for believers. In this regard, the body is an especially crucial conduit for the spiritual, for it is *through* (not against) the physical that the self can, ironically, attain spiritual transcendence in an encounter with the sacred.

Despite the frequent appearance of eroticism and the sensual in Salleh's poems, they never bear any hint of sexual promiscuity. Sex is correlative to love, and thus can only be performed between two individuals tied to each other by affection. Accordingly then, a man who channels lust to his wife, as in the case of *The Woman Who Said Yes*, is not indulging in a base act, but surmounting selfishness by pleasuring the one he loves even as he satisfies his need. Carnal and at times motivated by lust as it may be, sex is not deprived of its inherent sacred nature nevertheless. More importantly, as Salleh's poems seem to suggest, the carnal that ultimately serves (*The Woman Who Said No*) and expands (*The Woman Who Said Yes*, *The Crescent*) the sacred.

Salleh's deployment of eroticism also serves to reclaim another sphere of human experience that has been undermined by moral and religious narrowness: aesthetics. In Western painting, according to Arnold Berleant, the enjoyment of beauty has been for a long time:

...possible only through the intervention of distance. Only when the sensual has been depersonalized, removed from proximity, spiritualized, does it render itself aesthetically acceptable. Love as beauty, for example, has been held to demand the use of the principle of distance for its most complete development and fulfillment. And, as might have been expected, transcending the physical presence entirely has been taken as affording the greater beauty.⁴¹

Like the *religio* according to Agamben, Western painting has isolated the sensual from love, rendering beauty a quality detached from human experience. The sensual as an artistic expression may be permitted, but only when rendered in a detached manner that removes from it any hint of carnality. Hence, while nudes abound in Western art, there is almost no work that explicitly portrays the sexual act. Unstated in Berleant's argument, however, is the Judeo-Christian ideology – one shared by Islam, at least as practised in Malaysia – that underpins Western aesthetics, which prohibits representations of anything considered evil and immoral. A prime victim is sex. And since the body is the medium through which sex is enacted, it too has been rendered sinful, redeemable only through piety and constant policing and concealment. A logical consequence for art then is either an increasing abstraction of images suggesting eroticism, or omission of such images altogether. This is the fate suffered in the art scene in contemporary Malaysia.

According to Salleh, the inhibitions religious authorities impose on art can potentially lead to the people becoming disconnected from a "mystery" that characterizes humanness ("Patriarch as Literary Lecher", 139).⁴² Although what Salleh means by "mystery" is unclear, it strongly implies the sacred. Like the Romantic poets, Salleh arguably subscribes to the view that inherent in the imagination is the divine, and the circumscription of the former diminishes the latter. To reawaken the spiritual embedded in art would thereby require an approach nothing short of radical. For Salleh, his strategy is the deployment of sexual explicitness that often verges on the profane and the blasphemous. This, he qualifies, is his way of allegorizing "the intercourse of the imagination with the world". Through images of the carnal, his poems can be freed "to explore the theme [of sex] with faith in the wonder of our own humanness, to the point where the pull of the profane and the seduction of the sacred are mutually reinforcing, and the essential mystery of creativity is thereby affirmed."⁴³

For Salleh, to restrict the sensual in Malay art in fact contravenes what he claims to be an integral feature of Malay aesthetics. As he argues in "Salacious Pleasures of *Pantuns*," one distinct characteristic of the *pantun*, a Malay quatrain characterized by lines of eight to twelve syllables and a tight a-b-a-b rhyme

scheme, is its unabashed reference to the erotic. He concludes that a "race" which openly celebrates desire, lust, seduction and ferocious passion in its poetry, "cannot be a stranger to sexual hedonism, however you define the word" ("Salacious", 161).⁴⁴ In this celebratory spirit is the poem, *The Salacious Rhymes of a Self-Taut Prodigal*, composed. Both an autobiographical piece and a parody of Muhammad Haji Salleh's poem,⁴⁵ it employs the *pantun's* structure, and liberally sprinkles it with explicit depictions of the carnal:

As a boy, I loved to roll in the mud,
Watching buffalo cunts winking in the sun;
Often I'd stay up all night long, just to peep
at couples coupling to the call of the *azan*.⁴⁶
(stanza 2)

Crazed in the burning sun, drunk on spicy sins,
I turned the *pondok* into a hothouse of lust,
Five times a day, twixt the *azan* and the other din,
I abused my body like nobody's business.
(stanza 4)

Reading the Book, I'd sometimes get a hard-on;
The scent of paradise meant sex in every nook;
The passion of Zulaika always turned me on,⁴⁷
To the amazement of the pious gooks.
(stanza 5)

Along with *Haram Scarum* and *A Polyphonic Hymn to Polygamy*, this poem's playful tone must be read alongside Salleh's defense of the sensual in Malay art. That the poem and the essay are companion pieces is obvious (both have "salacious" for titles), and the main thrust of their argument is that sensuality and sex as base and sinful is neither a feature in Malay tradition nor Islam, but encouraged and implemented by institutionalized religion – metonymically represented by the *pondok* where the persona receives his religious education.⁴⁸ The persona is in fact perplexed by the inability of the "pious gooks" to appreciate the Book's (The Quran) graphic portrayals; for him, his peers' adherence to a religion that compels the self to become disassociated from the body is incredible, and demonstrates the power wielded by institutionalized religion over the people.

The profane is a feature commonly associated with the sacred, but in a broader context, what is sacred could include any discursive and ideological fields countenanced by the status quo and/or commonly upheld as hallowed or incontrovertible, thus rendering them impervious to challenge. Ironically, these

fields have often been "consecrated" and removed from "the sphere of human law" by human law itself.⁴⁹ In Malaysia, these would include *bumiputera* rights and the status of the national language: to question them is potentially an act of sedition that can lead to conviction, sometimes without trial (as legitimized by the Internal Security Act).⁵⁰ For Salleh however, these are precisely the kinds of sacred cows he targets in his poems. For example, he exposes the notion of *bumiputera* for its class-inflected hypocrisy ("Ménage à Trois"⁵¹) and political duplicity ("Pantuns for Perverts"⁵²), and parodies the Malay language for its heavy reliance on borrowed terms (especially from English), thus undermining its alleged superiority over other languages. The poem, "We got Minda, They only got Mind,"⁵³ is a case in point:

Our *puisi*, our *nobel*, our *drama*, our *prosa*
may be, in form, borrowed from the west;
But our writers have shown their ability for
asimilisasi, from old *realisma* to *realisma majis*;
From *modenisma* to *pasca-modenisma*.
We know all the *teori*; no need to read
the *karya kreatif* themselves. No need.
Mario vargas llosa, gabriel garcia marquez;
Magical names to know for the sake of *progres*.⁵⁴

This poem reveals the many words appropriated from English (novel, prose, assimilation, realism, magic realism, modernism, postmodernism, mind, and so on) that form the vocabulary of Malay language and literature. To therefore claim the preeminence of the Malay language over others is not only arrogance, but fundamentally unsupportable. Salleh is especially chagrined by the state-promoted view that only the Malay language can effectively communicate, or express, the "soul" of the people, "leaving English [and other languages] as the means of expressing the non-spiritual or purely secular material needs" ("Once Again, English Our English").⁵⁵ Evident in such a position is the attempt by the state to both legitimize the Malay language as the language of Islam, and to subtly coerce even the country's non-Muslim population into adopting such a stance, thus potentially undermining other faiths as a result. But as the excerpt from the poem wittily demonstrates, such an enterprise already subverts itself in its pretentiousness. If so much of the Malay language is derived from English (and others), is not English equally able to express the people's soul, and perhaps even more effectively, since it remains in a neutral zone uncontaminated by ethnic or religious affiliation? But Salleh's vision is more expansive than this, as he proudly declares in the conclusion to the essay "Once Again, English Our English: we Malaysians have more than one language in which to express our 'soul.' Isn't that all the better?"⁵⁶

THE LIMITS OF PROFANITY

Salleh's poems are profane only insofar that they re-establish a connection between the sacred and human spheres that have been declared vulgar, sinful or shameful by institutionalized religion. As such, his poems strictly abstain from blaspheming Islam as a *sacred* field: God, the Prophet and the tenets of the faith are never mocked. Instead, their prime target is Islam as an organized religion that has created a chasm between believers and the divine, and compelled Muslims to regard their bodies as contemptible. Salleh deploys profanity in his work primarily to reverse this. His poems attempt to resacralize the sexual and the sensual as both God's bounty and a channel through which the divine can be attained. In doing so, Salleh is perhaps restoring to believers one of Islam's richest legacies: love poems in their unabashedly erotic qualities. Classical Arabic poets such as Rumi, Khayyam, and Hafez, who belong to this tradition, are clearly Salleh's precursors, as evident in his enigmatically titled poem, *Poetry and Pus*:

...Just read the poetry
Of Persians – of Hafez and Khayam;
Of Iqbal from among the modernists.
Muhammad could in fact be seen as Islam's
First poet as well as man's last Prophet. Hear this:
Perfume and women are to me very dear,
And coolness comes to my eyes in prayer.⁵⁷

In claiming the Prophet as Islam's first poet, the poem refuses the view that the sacred is necessarily opposed to the carnal and the sensual (that is, the profane). If the Prophet could equate perfume and women with prayer, it is therefore not unreasonable to appreciate that delighting in the former carries similar benefits to adhering to the latter, for both lead the believer nearer to the divine. By rejecting the profane/sacred dichotomy, Salleh's poems persistently reinforce the complementary nature of both spheres. Evoking the profane to worry the divine prepares the latter for embracing "a new dimension of use" but without abolishing its sacredness.⁵⁸ Religion is no longer a separate and petrified sphere, but one that is immediately accessible to the individual as both spiritual and *physical* experiences.

If this is indeed Salleh's undertaking, it is certainly a courageous one, considering how much power religious authorities have over Muslims in Malaysia. Yet, laudable as this may be, one nevertheless wonders about the viability of Salleh's approach. Hence, while I admire Salleh's work, which I find refreshing and unique, I cannot help but also wonder if the purpose of his *modus operandi* is effective or ultimately self-defeating. This issue is especially pertinent in poems

that directly relate to religion. In fact, when turning to Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay's discussion of blasphemy in art, it becomes difficult to see how Salleh's poems can be purposeful at all. For according to these critics, religion belongs to the realm of the "basic good" because participation in it "promote[s] human flourishing in themselves and others."⁵⁹ That it may have been manipulated by the politics of the state does not, however, divest it of "goodness" altogether, because religion remains a vital means for transmitting values, sustaining culture, and providing solace to believers during difficult times. Blasphemy against it, as such, would be tantamount to "an act against one of the basic goods,"⁶⁰ and its consequences vary from merely "missed opportunities or passing disturbances" for some believers, to "impoverish[ing] people's participation in religion" and "radically [undermining their] faith and understanding."⁶¹

For Fisher and Ramsay, to commit an act of profanity (of which blasphemy is an instance) cannot possibly encourage a reconnection between believers and faith, since the very act already subverts such a possibility. While believers who are offended will dismiss, or even decry against it, those enfeebled in their faith will end up disbelieving altogether. If Salleh's poems potentially have a specific and redemptive objective, his sometimes callous deployment of profane language and blasphemy-inflected images derail rather than consolidate it. Take for example the poem quoted at the start of this section: the title of a work is, of course, the writer's sole prerogative, but to call a poem that celebrates Islam's literary gift *Poetry and Pus* seems to me a rather callous enterprise, especially since "pus", whether literal or metaphorical, is not even a focus of the poem.⁶² A similar criticism could also be made against the poem, *Sunday Morning*.⁶³ Here, the persona, a self-proclaimed Muslim apostate, attempts to join a church service but is prevented by an embarrassed priest, to whom the persona rudely retorts with:

...Who, in his right mind would
Want to convert into your lousy kind
Christianity, with a yahoo like you
As the priest here, who knows fuck all! (stanza 5, ll. 26–29)

On his way out, the persona continues his show of disrespect by letting out a scream, a la/The *adzan* [or *azan*], "*Allahu Akbar!* God is Great! And you yahoos inside can go to hell!" (stanza 6, ll. 7–9). Perhaps the poem, like many of Salleh's work, is criticizing institutionalized religion for separating out the sacred from the human sphere. Perhaps Christianity may not even be the poem's target at all, but state policies that have caused mutual suspicion between religions and the races. Accordingly then, the persona is infuriated because he is frustrated by the nation's contemporary situation, and views Christians as also colluding with it. Yet, the tone with which the poem concludes suggests self-righteous triumph,

which in turn, seems to justify the persona's insolence. Whatever political criticism potentially harbored by the poem becomes immediately muted, while its display of disrespect, irreverence and haughtiness takes precedence. Like *Poetry and Pus*, the poem's use of profanity is almost gratuitous; rather than deployed for illumination or criticism, it seems pointless and deployed merely to offend.

CONCLUSION

This brings me to my final point about the limits of the profane in Salleh's poetry. In my view, it is this feature, more than the frequent (and sometimes gratuitous) use of blasphemy and profanity that is largely responsible for Salleh's neglect by the academia and scholarship. I am referring to his inclination toward condescension as an artist. Famed for his rebelliousness and notoriety, Salleh is well known for doing exactly "as he pleases" (which is the title of his first collection of essays), such as peeing publicly at a cultural event. Although he later justifies his action in an open letter, one cannot help but detect a superior tone underlying it that is meant to highlight the event organizer's ignorance of what art is, and who therefore deserves the mockery from one who does know.

In his poems, such a tone of disdain is not unfamiliar, so obvious is their ridicule against those whom the persona sees as exhibiting inferior traits. Sometimes, their scorn is mixed with the profane to deliberately accentuate their odium, as demonstrated in *Sunday Morning* and *Haram Scarum*. Implied in such a tone is the persona's enlightened disposition, which allows him to view with condescension the failures and weaknesses in others. In another poem, *Testament to Engmalchin*, the persona mischievously pinpoints and makes fun of the distortions of the English language (especially in the areas of intonation and stress placement) when spoken by "true **malaysians**" (stanza 3, l. 1, emphasis in the original). This suggests his linguistic advantage over others, and indirectly, the fact that he is also better educated. Critic Lim Chee Seng is certainly right when he says that Salleh "uses Malaysian English mockingly,"⁶⁴ but more insidious is the contempt the poet apparently holds against those who use such English (called Manglish in Malaysia). With arrogant insistence, the poem maintains the persona's superlative quality by lampooning the users of Manglish. In *Salacious Rhymes*, that the persona calls his peers "pious gooks" not only demonstrates his disgust for their religious myopia, it hints that he views them as stupid as well. This is indeed ironic for a poet who often, in his art, attempts to collapse borders, whether racial or religious, that are divisive.

This pronounced, if unfortunate, attribute in Salleh's work, coupled with his liberal doses of linguistic profanities and images that intimate blasphemy, have together resulted in a critical disregard of the poet. Although misinterpretation of

his work is often cited as the reason for the neglect, I opine that the tone he often employs in his poems may have also contributed to his marginalization. A literary work which deploys profanity is always a risky enterprise because readers may be alienated not by what the work says, but *how* (the performative effect) it says. If used strategically, sparingly and divested of a frequent desire to mock others, profanity can be productive in its capacity to dispel the reader's complacency over crucial matters; otherwise, it becomes merely odious and rude, thus undermining the potentially constructive purpose the blasphemous-artist may bring to her work.

NOTES

1. See the issue on modern poetry by Haji Muhammad Salleh, "The World of the Individual and Contemporary Malaysian Poetry," *Tenggara* 24 (1989).
2. This letter is reprinted in Salleh ben Joned, *As I Please* (London: Skoob, 1994), 19–31.
3. See Lim Chee Seng, "A Survey of Malaysian Poetry in English," *World Literature Today* 74, no.2 (2000): 271–275.
4. For the first time in the country's post independent history, the ruling party, *Barisan Nasional* (The National Front) failed to gain majority vote, resulting in several Malaysian states becoming ceded to the opposition.
5. Adibah Amin, "Rising above the Barriers," *News Straits Times*, 14 August, 1987, national edition.
6. Ibid.
7. Tham Seong Chee, "The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia," in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Petaling Jaya: Longman, 2001), 41.
8. Aihwa Ong, "State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies and the Body Politic in Malaysia," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (California: California Univ. Press, 1995), 174.
9. Although the indigenous people of Malaysia are also subsumed under this category, they have little share in *bumiputera* privileges largely marginalized unless they adopt the Malay way of life and convert to Islam.
10. These include, among others, a university admission quota system which guaranteed that 55% of admission to any public universities were devoted to *bumiputera* students (a system that remains in place), the enforcement of bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in national schools, subsidised housing for the Malays, and government contracts to firms owned by *bumiputeras*.
11. Rajeev S. Patke, "Nationalism, Diaspora, Exile: Poetry in English from Malaysia," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38, no. 3 (2003): 72.
12. Ibid., 71.
13. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks, "Introduction," in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Longman: Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 2001), x.
14. Salleh, *As I Please*, 62.
15. See, for example, the works of Lawrence, D. H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl, and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1974).
16. Salleh ben Joned, *Adam's Dream* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2007), 63.

17. Noraini Othman, "Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Fundamentalism/Extremism: An Overview of Southeast Asian Muslim Women's Struggle for Human Rights and Gender Equality," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 344. The patriarchal nature of Islam in this country is further guarded by *syariah* laws, and polygamy is sometimes practiced with little compunction, often to the detriment of women. As Noraini attests, under the current *syariah* law, "It is easy for Muslim men in Malaysia to contract a polygamous marriage, or irresponsibly divorce their wife or wives, or neglect their children's maintenance or abandon their wives and children."
18. Quran, Surah al-Nisā 4: 3.
19. Salleh ben Joned, *Sajak sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane* (Kuala Lumpur, Silverfish Books, 2002), 46. *Haram* – that which forbidden, unclean and profane.
20. *Halal* – that which is permissible (the acronym of *haram*).
21. This is also the case with the Malay language itself. The word for pig, *babi*, is avoided altogether in the media and replaced with the more elevated-sounding term, *khinzir*, instead.
22. For a useful discussion and overview of the contentions surrounding art and pornography, see Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay, "Of Art and Blasphemy," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3. no. 2 (2000): 158–160.
23. Although Kristeva's theory of the sign is developed from Bakhtin and Derrida, I draw on her work precisely because I wish to demonstrate the sign's affinity with her notion of the abject.
24. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 40.
25. *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.
26. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 9.
27. *Ibid.*, 4.
28. Salleh, *Adam's Dream*, 117–118.
29. Salleh, *Poems Profane and Sacred*, 69–76 and 13.
30. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
31. *Ibid.*, 22, 23 and 24 respectively.
32. Khatijah is the Prophet Muhammad's first wife.
33. *Hijrah* is the pilgrimage to Mecca every Muslim should attempt to perform at least once in his or her lifetime.
34. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73.
35. *Ibid.*, 75.
36. *Ibid.*, 74.
37. *Ibid.*, 76.
38. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 253
39. *Ibid.*, 11.
40. *Ibid.*, 17.
41. Arnold Berleant, "The Sensuous and the Sensual in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23, no. 2 (1964): 187.
42. Salleh, *As I Please*, 139.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, 23.
45. Specifically, the poem "Si Tenggara's Homecoming", <http://poetrysite1.tripod.com/poetry2/class/id5.html> (accessed 17 September 2011).
46. *Azan* – the morning prayer observed by Muslims, the first of five throughout the day.
47. Zulaika (or Zulaikha) is the Koran's version of Potiphar, the pharaoh's wife who attempted but failed to seduce Joseph (Yusuf).
48. *Pondok* – a hut.
49. Agamben, *Profanations*, 73.

50. The Internal Security Act (ISA) was introduced in 1960 as a preventive detention law, which allows for detention anyone convicted without trial or criminal charges under narrow legally defined circumstances.
51. Salleh, *Poems Sacred and Profane*, 48.
52. Salleh, *Adam's Dreams*, 105–106.
53. Minda – mind.
54. Salleh, *Adam's Dreams*, 111 (emphasis in the original). See also, "Have Tempurung will Travel" (*Adam's Dream*, 115–16).
55. Salleh, *As I Please*, 63–66.
56. *Ibid.*, 66.
57. Salleh, *Adam's Dream*, 24. The last two lines are lines from a *hadith* (recorded words of the Prophet reputed to be authentic).
58. Agamben, *Profanations*, 76.
59. Fisher and Ramsay, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3, 145.
60. *Ibid.*, 146.
61. *Ibid.*, 147.
62. It is used only once to describe a certain Muslim, whose close-mindedness prevents him from appreciating the love poems in Islam's literary heritage.
63. Salleh, *Adam's Dream*, 35–37.
64. Lim, "A survey of Malaysian poetry in English," 273.

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