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## The Muse as Social Conscience: Poetry and Social Critique in the Work of Masuri S.N.

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The purpose of this paper is to look at poetry as social and political critique in the work of Singapore Malay literary doyen, Masuri S.N. I would like to explore a few questions: 1) Can poetry, with all its inherent power and richness—but also its tendency to draw attention to its own immediate aesthetic resonances—be the instrument of rectification, of human correction?; 2) Is the poet obligated to sacrifice, if necessary, art—with its source in contemplation—to political and social struggle?; and 3) How can poetry contribute to the social and political betterment of the human condition? This paper is in partial response to the increasing detachment, even disdain, that typifies public regard of poetry today; and to my developing conviction that my own teaching of poetry must openly engage the issues and concerns of time and place. With so much recent poetry alienating readers in its extreme privacy and considered to be too self-absorbed, hermetic and socially disengaged, can there be something other than the artifice of verse that has authority beyond the poem itself, simply in the fact and fervor of its social message, coupled with an insistence on the poet's special position as society's conscience, its seer and reformer? The answer, in the case of Masuri's poetry, I believe is, yes. As a poet who had himself lived through periods of violent social and political upheaval, he naturally addresses social political events in the context of personal experience, and his authority, the weight of his words, compels attention for their hard insights into the nature of struggle and selflessness, unflinching acknowledgments of responsibility, at once deeply personal and declamatory.

Over his career as a poet that spanned more than half a century, Masuri's poetry has eschewed the kind of detached, empty poeticizing, for one steadfastly grounded in the social and political exigencies of contemporary society of his time. His poems—known for their immediacy and fidelity to experience—deal with a gamut of social themes: the effects of colonisation, war, political upheaval, national struggle, urbanization, deracination, social marginalization and the perennial issue of identity and selfhood among the Malays in Singapore. Few poets of our time have devoted more intellectual energy to exploring the nature of poetic form—the way poems happen, the nature of inspiration, ways to 'invite the muse,' the protocol between form and content, the significance of fresh idioms, tropes, and the like—than Masuri. A substantial part of his two collections of essays<sup>1</sup> is devoted to such shop-talk about the poet's craft. At the same time, few poets have devoted more intellectual energy to exploring how social themes and commitments might find appropriate expression in poetry. He pursues these questions in his essays, but even more powerfully and intensely in his poetry itself.

To deny the validity of this social aspect of Masuri's poetry—regardless of how strident, radical, or naively idealistic his views might seem—is to misjudge grievously both the scope of his overall poetic achievement and the very integrity of his identity as an artist. The poems he wrote in his twilight years in *Warna Senja* do not represent

an abnegation or abandonment of the values articulated in his previous work; on the contrary, they attest to a deepening and intensification of those values through sustained commitment to Asas '50's own brand of *littérature engagée*: "Seni Untuk Masyarakat". And yet, the core of Masuri's vision is, and always has been, humanism<sup>2</sup>; in this respect, the increasingly socially engaged nature of his poetry from *Awan Puteh* to the last anthology of poems he published before his death, *Warna Senja*, marks the blossoming and maturation of an inherently empathic sensibility. To be a poet means, for him, to be utterly human, fully alive in one's mind and senses, keenly attuned to the diverse rhythms and vagaries of life.

In his 1965 collection of essays *Sekitar Sajak*, Masuri equates the tripartite term poet-human-life, stating: "Sebab puisi adalah ciptaan penyair. Penyair adalah manusia. Kita adalah manusia. Kehidupan kita manusia itulah yang menjadi bahan mentah yang digali, seolah dijadikan hasil puisi oleh penyair. Jadi, manusia, kehidupan dan puisi adalah merupakan soal yang rangkai-berangkai dan tidak dapat diceraikan, segi tiga" (SS, 85). The primary task of the poet, in his estimation, is to "translate" this heightened awareness of life's plenitude into language—the effort to win a voice of one's own amounts to nothing or becomes artificial unless it has been prompted by the conditions of human experience itself, by all that is cast into the poet's field of vision in the course of living. Poetry must never begin with experience at second hand, but with a steady eye on what surrounds us everywhere (KDKDK, 134).

It is this same life-affirming stance which underlies, and to some extent determines, the character of Masuri's engagement with social issues in his poems. For example, in a two-part essay published in *Berita Minggu* in 1990, explaining how and why he became a poet, he elaborated:

Bermulalah saya menulis sajak secara bersungguh-sungguh ketika ada desakan (ilham) dari dalam diri. Ertinya sajak datang kepada saya dan bukan sebaliknya... bermula dengan serangan udara kapal terbang Jepun menggugurkan bom-bomnya pada 8 Disember 1941 di Singapura...menyebabkan saya terkejut besar, apabila menghadapi dan menyaksikan dengan mata kepala saya sendiri peristiwa yang dahsyat...manusia-manusia mati bergelimpangan di jalanraya... Perkara yang saya lihat ini serta-merta mengejutkan perasaan dan fikiran saya ketika itu terhadap kehidupan dan kemanusiaan...saya inginkan sekali—entah bagaimana timbul dalam ingatan saya, ingin berbuat sesuatu dan menjadi sesuatu untuk mengubah nasib mereka, yang juga menjadi nasib hidupku... Itulah menjadi keupayaan kerdil saya menulis sajak2 menjadi 'rumah pengucapan kemanusiaan'. Ertinya semua pengalaman manusia cuba saya ungkap berdasarkan pandangan dan sikap hidup saya untuk cuba mengangkat darjat dan maruah manusia agar hidup berjiwa besar, bebas; jauh dari perhambaan dan sentiasa menjunjung kebenaran, walau bagaimana sukarnya sekalipun (KDKDK, 112, 115-116).

Masuri indicates in this statement that his social awareness and engagement was the direct, natural outgrowth of a moral obligation he felt to stand by certain attitudes and values expressed in his poetry, a desire to reinforce the rhetoric of personal conviction with poetic affirmation. Although he does not specify the exact nature of these convictions in his essay, this information can be readily gleaned from his poetry itself. The various explanations

Masuri has offered of what he perceives to be the role of the writer in society over the years, are especially helpful in understanding the roots of his social commitment in his art. In "Penulisan dan Tanggungjawab Kesasterawanan," for example, he declares that "[seorang sasterawan] mempunyai visi dan pandangan hidup yang dinamik, bukan saja untuk kepentingan diri sendiri, bahkan yang terlebih-lebih utama ialah memikirkan dan merenungi nasib umat dan kehidupan masyarakat sekitarnya",<sup>3</sup> while in the poem "Tekad", he describes it on a more personal level:

Dengan satu sajak  
Kugulung gunung yang mengepung  
Kuratakan semua lurah hidup  
Buat lalu sukma subur.

Dengan sebaris madah  
Kusepikan semua riuh  
Kuhapuskan semua gelojoh  
Buat suaraku meluncur mewah.  
Pemberian ini satu tugas tegang  
Kupegang gagang pena dari rintih seluruh tubuh  
Menerobos semua kabus subuh,  
Besok menyuluh wajah-wajah terang.

Pembebanan ini satu tagihan panjang  
Kuperah urat saraf dari getirnya hidup zaman,  
Menolak menimbang semua laun lacur  
Buat turunan yang sanggup hidup menggempur.<sup>4</sup>

Given the expansive parameters of these ruminations, it is evident that Masuri regards the nexus between the poet and his/her society as inextricable, and politics/social commitment as a phenomenon which no sensitive, thoughtful individual can avoid; any judgment or interpretation of the external world has potentially political implications. Masuri comes to understand that struggle—political as well as poetic, which must be fought out and renewed daily—is therefore an integral and inevitable facet of daily life, indeed, of consciousness itself; as such, he insists, it is no more alien to the medium of poetry than any other human concern:

Dalam tiap benua, dalam tiap negara dan dalam tiap bangsa akan sentiasa ada sekumpulan manusia yang amat mengambil peduli dengan kehidupan dan pengalaman manusia. Mereka ini tidak sahaja menghayati hidupnya secara lahiriah tetapi pada masa yang sama amat memerhati, bahkan menyerapi hingga ke dasar batinnya tentang erti dan maknanya kemanusiaan...Mereka inilah manusia penyair. Mereka inilah yang amat peka dan cukup terlibat dengan segala situasi, kondisi dan peristiwa yang telah, sedang dan akan berlaku di dalam masyarakat dan zamannya. Merekalah 'suara-suara kemanusiaan' yang cuba memberi makna secara kritikal dan sensitif terhadap kebaikan dan kekhilafan; terhadap kelebihan dan kekurangannya yang sedang berlaku di dalam masyarakat dan lingkungan, baik dari segi politik, sosio-ekonomi, pendidikan, kebudayaan dan lain-lainnya untuk mendapatkan

kehidupan yang lebih cerah dan baik buat umat manusia yang akan datang (“Mengapa Penyair?” *KDKDK*, 74).

The key phrase here is “human concern” (“maknanya kemanusiaan”)—the poet’s absolute, impassioned commitment to the affirmation of humanity/life also entails rigorously defending it against possible threat or destruction: “Penyair—kerana ingin melihat keutuhan dan kefitrahan umat manusia, mencintai alam jagat dan yang menjadikannya; mencintai sesama umat manusia dan sebagainya dengan sendirinya akan menolak segala yang mahu merosak dan menjahanamkan nilai-nilai kemanusiaan, walau demi untuk apa sekalipun!” (*KDKDK*, 74).

In the starkest, most elemental terms, Masuri sees the poet engaged in a struggle of life (“nilai-nilai kemanusiaan”) against “all that seeks to destroy and is deleterious to it” (“segala yang mahu merosak dan menjahanamkan[nya]”): the huge, faceless aggregate comprised of armies, governments, hegemonic discursive constructs, materialism, industrialisation, “the age of science and technology” (“zaman sains dan teknologi”)—later globalisation, multi-national corporations—and other insentient forces. The issue of social commitment/engagement in his art thus extends far beyond individual conscience to a broader, more fundamental concern, namely, the artist’s role in and responsibility to society. The series of dichotomies around which Masuri’s social statements is structured—mind/body, thought/action, detachment/participation, oppression/freedom, problem/solution—suggests that socio-political engagement is a moral imperative for the poet because it offers a means of safeguarding life/humanity. Word and world cannot be divorced from one another without disastrous consequences; in fact, some of Masuri’s harshest invective is directed against the pervasiveness of public apathy which indirectly aids the progress of these destructive forces by posing no resistance to them. Poetry, he believes, can serve as a revolutionary stimulus, awakening us from our sloth and indifference through the vivid re-creation and experience of the marginalised, underprivileged, disenfranchised, left behind or forgotten by ‘progress’ and ‘development’. “Sesungguhnya yang sentiasa disuarakan oleh para penyair dengan kepenyairan dan kemanusiaannya melalui puisi-puisi ciptaannya itu ialah menjadi semacam pemangkin, putik kesedaran yang menengadahkan masyarakat dari kealpaannya, [ia] membuat penggeledahan, penerokaan jiwa dan rohani manusia, agar pihak-pihak yang terlalu ghairah dengan pembangunan kebendaan itu tidak melampau-lampau sangat melecehkan golongan manusia yang mungkin terhimpit, bahkan sengsara hidupnya, demi berdiri atas nama pembangunan dan kemajuan dalam lapangan industri, sains dan teknologi dan sebagainya” (*KDKDK*, 76). The poet’s essential task then is to rescue us from our own indifference and inhumanity by rekindling a sense of sympathy and reverence for our fellow creatures—to reestablish what Masuri half a century earlier called “the path between the corporeal and the soul” (“lalu antara jasmani dan rohani”) (*SS*, 118):

...

Kuncup tiarap tunas-tunas segan bangun di sinar cahaya  
Bermain warna jingga juga lupa ketiadaan daya

Tersentak dari tidur nyenyak di dewan sajak  
Sandaran kerusi empuk sedikit membotak benak,  
Keinginan yang dicari menyembah-nyembah sujud di bumi  
Apa ada suatu suara yang membius wajah-wajah yang sudah pasi?<sup>5</sup>

Although the Japanese Occupation was undeniably the major catalyst in ‘politicizing’ Masuri’s poetry, it was neither the source nor primary impetus in the development of his political sensibility and the social engagement he invests in his poetry.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) was an external factor which, through its blatant violation of his personal value system, provided an irresistible call to action. Masuri’s political consciousness springs rather from a convergence of inner and outer experience that can be traced back to his earliest compositions. In *Awan Puteh* (his first collected poems, 1944-1951), one finds numerous intimations of his mature ideological stance, manifested largely through a persistent preoccupation with the “interplay of psychic and material life” (“pergolakan jasmani, jiwa dan batin”) (SS, 104). Poems like “Tiada Peduli” and “Pengakuan” explore the uneasy balance between Masuri’s private, inner life and the vast historical forces (in this case, British colonialism, World War II, the atrocities of the Japanese Occupation, the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), the rise of nationalism, etc.) that impinge on it from without. Though he himself is safe from the ravages of the war’s destruction, it is nonetheless impossible for him to deny the ugly fact of its existence. The war’s dissonance (“Sejenak sunyi segenap maya/ Membabar jiwa dihanyut masa,/ Rasa terpisah di dunia satu/ Disambar maling rasaian waktu”)<sup>7</sup> gnaws at his consciousness undermining the tranquility of his immediate surroundings and poses a serious dilemma: how can these disparate worlds—private/public, inner/outer—be reconciled and integrated?<sup>8</sup> In the poem, “Jiwa Hidup,” from his 1967 collection *Bunga Pahit*, Masuri speculates that this gulf can only be bridged by a tremendous act of will—daring to accept and fully inhabit the conditions of one’s own existence; to persevere...and yet also to go much further, beyond the end, beyond whatever ends: to begin, to be, to defy:

Kita hidup mengikut apa yang dicetak  
Betapa mudah dan terjun melorot mentah,  
Kita tidak usah berfikir mencari jalan yang susah  
Ikut saja gendang dan menari sepuas gerak

Hanya dalam hati sekali-sekali berdegup keras  
Apakah hidup demikian mudah tiada jalan merentas,  
Kita dilahirkan sekadar memburu angin yang menderu  
Sempatpun tiada untuk menoleh apa yang terlepas.

Jika sedemikian datarnya jalan menuju maut  
Antara kisah pagi dan entah bila kita tersangkut,  
Bukankah kering sekali segala ragam yang pernah kita rebut  
Dan sejarah budaya insan hanyalah beku tidak berlanjut.

Kita sekali hidup membawa tulisan lengkap sekali  
Menyambung turunan membikin jejak di bumi Tuhan,  
Kita merentas daerah panas hutan penuh berisi  
Kembangkan dada dengan cita meneroka seluas lautan:  
Karena sejuta manusia yang hidup menurut buta  
Lebih besar seorang yang berani angkat kepala dan meneroka. (BP, 20)

The question of how politics and poetry are connected is a perennial one in literary history. *Sastera* (literature) in Malay, according to Muhammad Haji Salleh (1991; quoting

Teeuw), has its roots in Sanskrit: “‘sas’ meaning ‘direction, teaching and instruction,’ and ‘-tra’ meaning ‘instrument and suggestion’” which conjoined, gives us “‘a tool for teaching, a guide book, a book of instruction’”; at the same time—Muhammad goes to add—the “Malays tend to demand instruction *and* beauty from their works of art” (92; my emphasis). Similarly (or not), from classical times, the main tradition of Western literary criticism asserted that poetry ought both to delight and instruct, to be sweet *and* useful. Western literary conception however, subsumed political, religious, social or philosophical content under the description of genres. A poem, such as the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, which recounts a people’s history as an explanation of its future destiny, is an *epic*. A poem, such as Pope’s “Essay on Man” or Shelley’s “Queen Mab,” which offers a philosophical or religious account of human nature so as to recommend a particular social or economic order, is *didactic*. In western literature, the possibility of social message, values or ideas is presupposed in the poet’s choice of genre. It is an aspect of how the poem is to be *useful* or *instructive*. Western critical theory addressed questions of form and content separately and conceived of form as the decoration of content. The same cannot be said of Malay literature. Malay poetry, in particular, creates autonomous, aleatory existences out of form and genre, by finding the most appropriate form which is best suited (in terms of its aesthetic qualities; i.e. the poem’s “sweet,” beautiful, pleasurable appeal) to the message, information, values and ideas it tries to convey. In finding the form which is the revelation of content, the poet makes clear to himself and thereby his readers, the temporal and eternal questions; in other words, the ideas and values that his text advances. The poet “finds the right form *out there* by internalizing those temporal and eternal problems, holding dialogue with the heart.”<sup>9</sup>

Masuri is the inheritor of this literary tradition. The poem, Masuri says in “Pengalaman Kreatif dan Kemanusiaan” (1990) consists of the poet’s own voice, markedly, candidly, speaking in the poet’s unmediated character, written from a personal rather than a fictive, and a subjective rather than objective, standpoint. Yet the poem must also deal with social observations, descriptions of events, expressions of opinions:

Seorang penulis...mesti memerhati dengan cukup tajam keadaan realiti yang sebenar secara objektif. Kerana hanya dengan jalan ini sahajalah hasil-hasil ciptaannya benar-benar rapat dan sebati dengan realiti. Jika tidak, maka hasil karyanya kosong dan mungkin mengelirukan.

Selain daripada itu, saya fikir, seorang penyair tidak sahaja sekadar memantulkan benda-benda dan peristiwa secara objektif. Dia juga harus meneroka makna yang cukup dalam bagi tiap-tiap benda, perkara dan peristiwa yang dihayati dan diresapi, serta mencuba agar pembaca turut menikmati perasaan penyair menerusi cara pengucapannya dalam sajak-sajaknya.

Ini kerana sastera wujud bukan sekadar untuk menghiburkan hati pembaca-pembacanya. Kalaupun begitu, saya fikir, bukanlah itu sahaja tujuannya (*KDKDK*, 132).

Of course, Masuri wrote poems with social and political themes; yet his commitment to his art (read: his commitment in expressing reality in its conjunction with words in their finest music and texture that necessitates poetic language), is total and unambiguous. In modern Malay poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, one can think of “Yang Tak Dilupakan” (1955) by Noor S.I. and “Kepada Manusia” (1961) by A.S. Amin<sup>10</sup> as examples of poems edged by a sharpened awareness (though not expressed overtly) of political and historical forces by

poets whose work is largely reflective and personal in nature. If a poet's gift dictates a kind of poetry that is not dominated by political themes, that does not preclude an awareness of politics/public social issues or the possibility of exercising social responsibility in other spheres. Other poets, however, more explicitly and consistently integrate this awareness and sense of responsibility into poetic language. Masuri S.N. is among them.

In Masuri's work we see a very powerful acknowledgment of this aim, a lyrical coming-to-terms with this mandate. A look at some of his poems below will serve here to exemplify some of the effects on the poetic oeuvre of modern Malay poetry of the 1950s and 1960s made by the urgent—and in the case of the generation of writers of Asas '50—open recognition of the socio-political dimension.

Over the years, Masuri has written poems like "Dunia Puisi," "Suara dan Bicara," "Turut Memberi," "Potret Hati" and "Dalam Sajak," each of which corresponds to a particular phase in Masuri's thinking about a single theme—that of the poet's role in society. All these poems pertain in some way to the poet's purpose or "function"; thus, they provide a scaffolding that assists Masuri in articulating his own views on the subject. The opening section of "Potret Hati, with its exhortative subtitle: "(jangan menodai kemurniaan seni)," contains an oblique reference to what he envisages as the role of the poet and underscores the inherently political nature of the poet's task:

Kapan kita bicara begitu berat menagih sukma  
Tak kubiarkan petaka lagi akupun turut serta;  
Satu karya satu Negara kita 'kan punya peranan poten waja  
Bukan pilu sekadar mengutuk membiar sengketa merajalela.

Kita yang ingin mengisi sukma batin bumi persada  
Biar dalam gulita kenapa curiga?  
Mana tahu dalam waktu menjangkau ketemu dada  
Cukup satu busung menampung seluruh cita perwira. (BP, 89)

These lines concern the evolution of the poet's selfhood, the process whereby he strives to achieve his maximum human potential and so fill his given space ("mengisi sukma batin bumi persada"). By extending his powers of reflection and intuition to the limit, the poet becomes an example to others: his life is a conscious work of art, carved and wrought into a distinctive design, which by virtue of its beauty and integrity, fulfills a basic social need. Masuri's use of the vivid, forceful, alliterative phrase "membakar marak menyala" in the second section of the poem evokes both a source of illumination and moral inspiration; the phrase itself suggests simultaneously incandescence, a kindling of spirit and illumination. Masuri's meditation plays on these subliminal associations by describing the poet as a source of light, one whose dreams and unconscious thoughts are translated into "percikan sejuta warna" which counter the dull glare of sepulchral darkness that has enveloped the world ("dalam gelita...kegelapan...menudungi bumi hijau"). Masuri's words in Part One of the poem take the form of a direct address to the reader, enjoining him or her to experience and incorporate as much of the physical world as possible:

Satu hari yang telah datang  
Berperistiwa mengharapi semua,  
Bahagia lagi kasih semata kita  
Tanah air bumi kita merumahi cita.

Lalu kita melihat kelam malam  
Menatap dari retak atap hitam,  
Mestikah kita bicara hitam-hitam  
Arang angus semuanya mesti legam!

Pertanyaan tak selicin lidah melulur penganan  
Ini mestinya dicukai desak derita dendam,  
Karena satu tusuk kita membusuk semua tokoh  
Lalu kita apa geletak buntang menangisi bintang! (BP, 89)

The first meditation celebrates the primacy and vitality of the senses as well as the value of attuning oneself to natural cycles. A subtle cyclical movement is embedded into the lyric of the entire poem itself, which progresses from morning to evening, juxtaposing metaphors of light and darkness, and repeatedly alludes to the process of growth, blossoming, and decay; with its consanguineous implication on the cycle of human life, and by extension, the rise and fall of nations. This experiential knowledge of the physical environment deepens man's awareness of his own role in the greater scheme of things; nature here is invoked not in any idyllic pastoral sense, but as definitions of conditions and a living extension of, and addition to, nature, to counter society's negative impulses of the poet's role in it. The unenviable task of the poet—with his oracular, and yet, ominous, pen ("pena gelita") that chronically critiques society's failings and failures—is not, according to Masuri in another poem ("Bukan Kuminta"), a vocation he craves nor covets. There is, instead, a sacrifice or submergence of self to larger political and social issues, a higher calling, if one may call it that: "Dalam satu hidup kita memikul beban mengayai batin// Biar buat sekarang kita korbankan segala nikmat" (BP, 90). In this submergence, "I" ("aku") becomes incorporated with "we" ("kita") in Masuri's new identity in solidarity and action with the literary compatriots (*rakan seperjuangan*) of his generation. The personal does not dissolve in the collective but gains force, definition and liberation. Revolutionary transformation involves trial by fire and violence, but these are seen as temporary, cathartic stages of progressive political action, and Masuri welcomes them as active counterforces to numb indifference/inaction: "Berapa harapan telah kita pertaruhkan/ Di bumi, di hati di tiap derap langkah kedepan,/ Mestikah kita akhiri sekali ini dengan masih kita berdiri:/ Bahawa buat esok telah pesuk segala budi?// Memang dalam sekarang mimpi manis tinggal tipis/ Biduk tiris ditambah gerimis selaku tangis..." (BP, 90). The reluctance of the "We" ("Kita"), i.e. poets, to ally identity with social function (both as society's scribe and seer) is perceptibly tinged with a sense of pathos. Masuri has no illusions about the power of poetry to change political structures or to eradicate social ill, and he offers no systematic programme for social regeneration in this poem. Rather, the role of the socially committed poet lies in his ability to celebrate what is valuable and to protest what is unconscionable in society. What the poet is called on to clarify is not answers but the existence and nature of questions: "Karena sekadar angkat pena gelita sekitar tiada terang juga/ 'Kan kita menyedari derita dunia sudah sedia sebelumnya suka// Kita hanya satu gelagat dari percikan sejuta warna/ Mestikah dengan satu sebut semua gedung roboh merata!" (BP, 90).

In another meditation in the poem, "Yakin," Masuri reinforces his statement about the poet as a model or exemplar for society at large:

...

Aku terang  
 Karena di siang aku menyerang.

Kupilih cahaya-cahaya  
 Ketika malap di mana-mana,  
 Lalu bahaya segan menyala  
 Karena aku mara bernyala.

Di mana selamanya  
 Ada gelita ada derita,  
 Aku tempuh membawa jiwa  
 Aku yakin membawa cahaya.

Selagi hidup membawa hasrat  
 Selagi pena kugurat-gurat... (BP, 54)

To the question, "Apakah sebenarnya tujuan penyair itu menggubah puisi dalam erti kedirian penyair itu sendiri?", he enumerates:

- (a) mengayakan pengalaman dalam perbendaharaan hati manusia,
- (b) hendak menambahkan halus perasaan kemanusiaan manusia mencintai terhadap alam keliling dan terhadap segala makhluk Tuhan seluruhnya,
- (c) hendak menyenangkan hati pembaca-pembaca dengan gubahan-gubahan puisinya yang indah dan berisi fikiran yang tinggi,
- (d) hendak mencuba meninggikan hasil kesusasteraan, kesenian dan kebudayaan bangsa dan tanahair di mana ia telah dihidupkan itu,
- (e) hendak mencuba menginsafkan manusia supaya turut merasa dan memikirkan soal-soal kehidupan dengan sungguh-sungguh dan tidak sekadar di kulit sahaja. Dan akhirnya mereka hendak mencuba menambahkan indah dan manisnya rasa hidup di mayapada yang luas ini. (SS, 84-85)

The task of the poet then is both introspective and open-ended: the poet's role is not to provide answers or pat solutions to the problem of being human, but rather to discover, formulate, and ultimately differentiate between the temporal and eternal questions. This internalized process of clarification through self-knowledge turns outward and establishes a vital link with the poet's community at large through the act of writing. As Masuri states in his essay, "Sastera Melayu Baru dalam Gelombang Kosmopolitanisme di Singapura": "Penyair yang menyajak bukan bertujuan untuk mencari kepuasan, atau kerana cita-citanya, tetapi kerana adanya *compulsion* (semacam desakan dari dalam diri) untuk menulis... Berdasarkan pengalaman realitinya, mereka cuba menyajak dengan penuh kegembiraan pancainderanya. Oleh kerana pengalaman atau apa yang dirasa atau dilihat oleh penyair itu tadi dalam realitinya amat malap dan getir (tidak sebagaimana yang dibayangkan dalam imajinasinya), maka puisi-puisi ciptaannya merupakan perjuangan terus-menerus untuk mereka mentaksir kesahihan perasaan peribadi penyair dalam menghadapi kenyataan dunia realiti yang menggetirkan itu" (KDKDK, 199). Thus, writing itself—committing one's thoughts to paper—takes on an inescapably political dimension.

In contradistinction to the certitude and conviction shown by the poet as social champion/hero (“wira budaya masyarakat dan zamannya,” *KDKDK*, 80) in “Yakin,” we can clearly see that Masuri’s intention in his poem “Bicara Diri” has clearly gone beyond the simple desire for self-expression (“mencari kepuasan, atau kerana cita-citanya”) to the exploration of, and a descent into, the uncharted regions of the self. History and personal consciousness converge as he reflects, on his thirty-first birthday, his own sense of ambivalence—at once “keras besi” and “lembut sekali”; at times “bimbang,” other times “berani—as the contradictions and paradoxes (“Kebimbangan dan keagakan/ Mengambang dan meragukan:/ Kadang kupersetan hancurkan/ Lalu berani mandiri-bangunkan”) get enmeshed into the metaphorical interstices that Masuri finds within his own mind (“terganggu kebingungan”). Through his deft use of imagery, the boundaries between the objective and subjective, the physical and spiritual, disappear:

Aku boleh lembut sekali  
 Aku boleh keras besi  
 Samasekali tak peduli:  
 Dan kadang terlalu hati-hati  
 ...  
 Sudah berapa kali mati  
 Terganggang kebingungan:  
 Tapi berapa ratus kali aku menerkam  
 Sudah menikam.

Lembut dan keras  
 Aku tak pernah bebas  
 Dari diriku ruhku  
 Selamanya kutahan kebanggaan manusiaku. (*BP*, 72)

A harsh, discordant energy is unleashed in the poem through an interrogation of his dialogic imagination:

Iman yang memagari  
 Kusebut Tuhan Ya Rabbi;  
 Segala yang kumulai  
 Apakah nanti akan kuakhiri!

The poet’s response to this question, as well as the series of antinomial oppositions he juxtaposes, is melded into mellifluous concordance by virtue of their corresponding rhyme, at the same time that it serves paradoxically as an aural representation of the antagonistic split Masuri perceives within his psyche. The ego is fractured, splintered into a multiplicity of conflicting emotions. In acknowledging that an innate capacity for anger, aggression, and violence coexists alongside his impulse to love, celebrate, and conserve, Masuri exposes the dualistic core of all humanity, the freakish trait that allows us to simultaneously be the inflictor of pain and punishment and the comforter who alleviates that pain. While a strong social conscience informs his poetry, it also engenders new dilemmas: an awareness of history as it impinges on the present moment, of reality beyond his direct apprehension, and of unassimilable dualities at odds with innate impulse to synthesize experience through poetic vision. The interpenetration of inner (imagination) and outer (reality) that sustains

psychic equilibrium which he speaks of earlier in a preceding quotation cited in this paper, becomes polarized in an almost Manichaeian opposition of good (life as he has known it, human potential as he can envision it, poetic power as he has enacted it) and evil (the knowledge, simultaneously, of war, suffering, hypocrisy, oppression, and the obliteration of human dignity).

Thus, in the process of coming to know and understand himself more intimately, the poet gains deeper insight into the complexities and contradictions of the world. The final two stanzas of "Bicara Diri" seem startlingly optimistic in the wake of the ambivalence and confusion that precede it. It begins, appropriately, with a realization, and thereby relates back to the poet's assertion in the fourth stanza of the first section of the poem: "Tapi sampai sini aku menyadari/ Aku belum sekali lari,/ Menghadapi kekerasan dan kelembutan/ Aku belum memungkiri diri" (*BP*, 73). Though he inscribes the typical romantic obstacles to revelation/self-discovery, in the preceding stanzas—the flow of time, the arresting inertia of self-doubt, the stasis engendered by ambivalence, of not being able to finish what he started—he overcomes them with a tone of celebration, ending his poem in a triumphant (but not self-congratulatory) note where neither the impinging world outside nor the integrity of the artist's vision, and his fidelity to it, are compromised.<sup>11</sup>

Masuri suggests that the poet must not be paralyzed by society's seemingly insurmountable ills like war, suffering, hypocrisy, oppression, poverty and injustice, but continue to sing and celebrate the beauty and plenitude that life has to offer. In "Suara dan Bicara," Masuri comes to a striking conclusion: despite—or more accurately, because of—the poet's insight into the dark, destructive impulse which lies within the human heart, it is his responsibility to actively combat this force by exercising his imagination and celebrating life for the brief duration "selagi hayat dikandung badan":

Jika suara sekarang tidak guna menentang  
Hanya mungkin merayu atau menjilat bintang telanjang,  
Yang manisnya memerah darah buat memerah kaki langit jalang.

Jika berlagak sekarang kerana bicarakan napas memanas  
Atau usapi periuk kerontang membelasi nasib meramas  
Juga tidak lengkap hanya sekadar memuntahkan kias.

Tidak bisa apa-apa angkat pena tidak cukup kata  
Licinkan daya curahkan muka ambil di mana-mana tembok terbuka,  
Sudah terang kepulauan kita membusuk timbunan rangka.

Hidup kita bukanlah tidak bicara tidak suara menandakan mesra,  
Kerana bersuara merasa bicara menandakan punya balasan dosa  
Lagipun kita faham hidup sekarang bukan selesai buat hari tua.  
(*SSMB*, 54)

For all his horrendous actions, man's capacity for evil is less appalling, than a failure to develop his most human function: the imagination, to its fullness, and consequently a failure to develop compassion.<sup>12</sup> For Masuri, silence, resignation, and despair are therefore unacceptable responses to the social maladies and problems endemic in contemporary life; the necessary corrective is rather, not only courage to speak out and to express our moral outrage, but to make sure that indignation is also accompanied by real confrontation and

action. The poet's virtue (and, by extension, his constructive contribution to society) is simply to be what he is—sentient, sympathetic, humane—to register an unflinchingly truthful response to the increasingly dehumanized circumstances in which he lives. This testimony, according to Masuri, is the “utmost response” that can be expected of any artist. “[S]ifat semula jadinya dan hasrat hati [penyair] yang sentiasa rindukan kedamaian, kesopanan dalam kehidupan serta terang-terang menolak tindak-tanduk yang bersifat kekerasan dan tingkah laku kehaiwanan dan kemunggaran” (KDKDK, 77).

The evocative and inspiring lines of “Dunia Puisi—Bisikan Hati Penyair” bring the reader back full circle to the beginning of our discussion; echoing Masuri’s words about the poet “filling his whole space” (“mengisi sukma batin bumi persada” from the poem, “Potret Hati”), but at the same time amplifies their meaning by conjoining them to a specific goal—“Untuk hidup tidak pernah diikat hati.”

Dalam hiruk-pikuk dunia gila berharap  
Kami ada satu dunia asing sendiri  
Bebas dari keributan yang menggugat sarap  
Lepas berfikir mengembara ke sana sini.

Kami ada lagu tiada penyanyi  
Kami ada kecapai tiada bertali,  
Tapi resaplah kedamaian di alam seni  
Untuk hidup tidak pernah diikat hati.

Siapa nanti datang memberi mimpi  
Siapa nanti sayang memberi budi,  
Kami tidak mahu dunia mengutuk diri  
Hidup ini bukan kebanggaan yang kami cari.

Jika ada yang berkata kami tidak pernah ada  
Tapi apakah yang ada dan apakah yang tiada  
Jika ada tidak pernah memberi tapi menerima:  
Tidakkah yang ada pernah tiada?

Selagi kami bernafas diberi udara  
Hidup ini tak kami biarkan belalu saja,  
Hiruk-pikuk dan boleh apa saja,  
Semua kami terima—semua kami cuba memberi warna. (SSMB, 36)

In this regard, his conception of the poet's role assumes primordial, almost shamanistic, overtones; through the power of song, the poet not only keeps the “tumult of the world” (“hiruk-pikuk dunia gila”) in check, but sets an ethical and aesthetic example for society at large—encouraging others to also try to “give; not just to receive” (“Jika ada tidak pernah memberi tapi menerima”).

The poems in the foregoing discussion thus establish a crucial philosophical framework through which to view the social content of Masuri's poetry. The practical “effectiveness” of his poems as society's voice of conscience is ultimately a moot issue; what is of prime importance, however, is his urgent insistence on the need to remain human(e), to revere life, and to be conscious of the implications of events which occur beyond the small circle of our

daily existence. Masuri's work refuses to let us forget that we are living our lives in a state of excess that is eroding our human values at a rate unparalleled in all history (KDKDK, 75-76)<sup>13</sup>, by candidly documenting his own unremitting struggle to react to, incorporate and make sense of his community and his world. Can poetry then be the instrument of social rectification, of human correction? Is poetry any longer enough, we courageously ask. The answer, I believe, is: that poetry cannot change the world, cannot alter realities—but it can move hearts, waken individuals. Through the luminous sparks of Masuri's poems, we begin to comprehend that the personal *is* political—to change society, we begin with the individual. The nexus between the individual and his society, that relationship, expressed in a variety of combinations of part to part and parts to whole, defines the people we are and the society we inhabit. Therein lies the beauty and verity of Masuri's poetry.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See his *Sekitar Sajak* (Singapore: Malaysia Publications Limited, 1965) hereafter designated *SS* and cited in text; and *Kreativiti dan Kemanusiaan dalam Kesusasteraan* (Shah Alam: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1998) hereafter referred to as *KDKDK*.

<sup>2</sup> A humanism which, as Azhar Ibrahim (2007) extrapolates, is three-dimensional: "Terdapat tiga segi kemanusiaan yang boleh kita perhatikan dalam pemikiran Masuri. Pertama, rasa keterikatannya pada nasib manusia Melayu yang hidup di sekelilingnya, teristimewa kepedulian partikular beliau terhadap Melayu Singapura dan kehidupan nasionalnya. Kedua, pemihakan kepada mereka yang tersenyap dan terlupa dalam kehidupan hari ini. Dan ketiga, rasa komitmen yang tinggi sebagai inteligentsia untuk menjadi api penyedar."

<sup>3</sup> Masuri S.N. in Mohamed Pitchay Gani, ed. *Dalam Merenung Dalam: Kumpulan Esei dan Kritikan 1977-2005* (Singapore: ASAS 50, 2006), p.192.

<sup>4</sup> Masuri S.N., *Puisi-Puisi Pilihan Masuri S.N.* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995), p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> Masuri S.N., "Cerita Sajak," in *Bunga Pahit: Sajak-sajak Pilihan 1957-60* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 12; hereafter designated *BP* and cited in text.

<sup>6</sup> Equally, or perhaps, more important ideologically to the shaping of Masuri's conception of his role as his society's social conscience, are the impacts and influence of what was going on in the world at that time. Ismail Ahmad (1966), for example, suggests that Masuri's role as 'committed' poet, an engaged poet 'in the world,' is contemporaneous with a sense of nationalist awakening which was almost *de rigueur* at that time and also with what was going on in other parts of the world: "[kesedaran ini] ditambah dengan perkembangan di luar—kemerdekaan dan revolusi di Indonesia, kebangkitan negara-negara lain di Asia dan Afrika, semangat kebangkitan negara-negara Asia-Afrika ini yang memukul terus penjajah-penjajah dan saki-baki penjajah, dan tuntutan mereka untuk memberikan tenaga baru dalam pergolakan dunia" (2).

<sup>7</sup> Masuri S.N., "Senjakala," in *Awan Puteh* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1958), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> See Masuri's account of his grim experience and the grisly reality of the Japanese Occupation he witnessed in my earlier quote in this paper. This imbroglio that arose out of these antinomies of private/public, inner/outer erupts as a "psychological crisis" subtends much of his early poems: "Perkara yang saya lihat ini serta-merta mengejutkan perasaan dan fikiran saya ketika itu terhadap kehidupan dan kemanusiaan. Terjadi krisis psikologi dalam jiwa saya" (*KDKDK*, 115).

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Haji Salleh, echoing Benedetto Croce, maintains that "each work of art is an *intuitive* work, unique, with its own identity" (1991: 98; my emphasis) and that any study of the concept of genres in Malay literature, must, among others, consider its "polyglossic" nature and "the relationship of the work with the real world" (100). In a similar vein, Masuri attests to the spontaneity and aleatory nature in his choice of form and content in his poetry such: "Bentuk sajak...tidak saya reka-reka dan rancang-rancang di kepala sebelum sajak itu lahir tercipta. Tegasnya antara bentuk dan isi sajak...itu datangnya seiring dan pada satu masa serempak, betul-betul pada waktu saya menuliskannya hingga siap. Ini kepada saya bererti pengucapan jiwa saya tumpahkan dalam seluruh

sajak itu" (SS, 66). Consider also his take on the poetic impulse to make the "useful," "sweet": "...matlamat utamanya ialah untuk cuba-cuba menyelesaikan sesuatu yang kasar, yang tidak beres, yang tidak sopan dan yang tidak seni agar menjadi harmoni dan indah...para penyair menggunakan satu bahasa dan satu suara. Suara kemanusiaan. Suara-suara yang cuba-cuba membina *order* dari segala kekacaulibuan dan *disorder* yang terdapat di alam jagat ini...tidak kira bagaimana kekacaulibuan, hiruk-pikuk dunia dan sekeliling kita, para penyair yang bererti akan cuba 'merumahnya' dalam sebuah bentuk yang harmoni, sopan dan teratur" (KDKDK, 75, 77).

<sup>10</sup> Together with Salmi Manja, A. Samad Said and M. Ghazali, the work of these two poets are often labeled "sajak-sajak kabur" ("obscure poems") by critics and said to be characterized by an "impressionistic style and less concerned with putting across a direct message. Their work is highly individualistic; it displays no overt political consciousness, and its meanings are implicit rather than explicit" (Kirkup, 1968: xii).

<sup>11</sup> At the end of his essay, "Penyair dan Sajaknya," Masuri issues a salutary caution: "apa yang terpenting dalam kesenian ialah kejujuran, janganlah sampai terjadi 'Seni jalang berlagak dara'" (SS, 52).

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Masuri S.N., "Penulis dan Akar Tunjangnya": "Manusia memang semula jadi memiliki imaginasi. Tidak cukup dengan mendengar, memandang, merasa, menghidu dan menyentuh sesuatu secara kenyataan di dalam hidupnya tetapi manusia memiliki otak yang dapat membayangkan sesuatu, menggambarkan sesuatu...di samping dapat menghayati serta mengalami peristiwa-peristiwa yang menimpa dan menyentuh perasaan dan jiwanya, masyarakat sekitarnya dan orang di dalam lingkungannya" (KDKDK, 177).

<sup>13</sup> See also his discussion of poetry in the face of "gugatan penghidupan semasa ("perturbations of contemporary life") (KDKDK, 164-176).

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