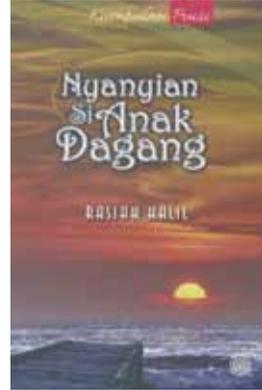


BOOK REVIEW

Rasiah Halil 2013.
Nyanyian Si Anak Dagang.
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A poem does not exist in a vacuum of meaning. Every poem that is written will surely convey a different meaning for different readers. From a poet's point of view, poems surely have their own, personal meaning. Poems do not only convey the poet's thoughts but also record the poet's life experience. However, readers, too, are free to feel and think about poems according to their own life experience, because every person's life is different. It is a certain shared level of understanding that every poem tries to express. This can be seen in Rasiah Halil's collection of poems titled *Nyanyian Si Anak Dagang* (Songs of the Traveller).

Rasiah Halil was born in Singapore in 1956, a year before Malaya attained its independence. At the time Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, Rasiah Halil was nine years old. Although at that time the poet probably did not have any feelings about the separation, as a Malay who experienced this event, which was a historically significant one for both her country and the people of her ethnic group, Rasiah Halil seems to have been affected by it as well, as can be traced in all of the poems in *Nyanyian Si Anak Dagang*.

This collection of 178 poems is divided into three parts. The division is in the order of chronology in which the poems were written. The part subtitled "Mencari Pulau" (Looking for an Island) contains 47 poems written between 1992 and 1999, followed by "Di Tanjung & Di Selat" (At the Cape & In the Straits) which contains 59 poems written from 1998 to 2003, and "Di Pelabuhan Hayat" (At the Harbour of Life) which contains 72 poems written in the period of time between 2004 and 2011.

In the preface, Rasiah Halil states that “Mencari Pulau” is a kind of quest due to a feeling of “loss” after having been jolted by several events that affected the poet both personally and in her career. In this quest, the poet journeyed to several places, including the United States, Thailand, India, Malaysia and within her own homeland of Singapore, which is reflected in her poems. In the part subtitled “Di Tanjung & Di Selat”, the poet continues this quest. Finally, the poet appears to be able to understand and figure out the meaning behind her quest in “Di Pelabuhan Hayat”, where she admits, “*saya semakin mendekati pelabuhan yang tenang apabila ia berlabuh di Makkah dan Madinah pada musim haji pada Januari sehingga Februari 2004. Saya semakin terlihat samudera yang besar, walaupun perahu saya tetap kecil dalam menyusur sungai, laut dan lautan kehidupan.*” (“I came closer to the tranquil harbour when I “anchored” in Mecca and Medina from January to February 2004. I could see more of the great ocean, although my boat remained small, travelling the rivers, seas and oceans of life.”)

Based on this admission, the collection of poems will be interesting reading for those who wish to know what the poet has “lost” and what she is “searching” for, as well as what she “finds”. The reader may be aided in the search for meaning by using the phrases “*samudera yang besar*” (great ocean), “*perahu saya tetap kecil*” (my boat remains small) and “*sungai, laut dan lautan*” (rivers, seas and oceans), which can be found in the final lines of the preface in this second collection of poems by Rasiah Halil. These phrases may even serve readers as a kind of “compass” in uncovering the meaning behind Rasiah Halil’s poems.

It is useful to look at the first poem, titled “Pencarian” (Search), where the poet’s lines depict a self that is on a quest to find something.

...
*inikah pencarian yang panjang
atau penemuan yang belum didamaikan
memaknakan perjalanan
mengisi kehidupan
dalam sarat fikiran, perasaan.*

...
(...
is this a long search
or a meeting as yet unfulfilled
giving meaning to the journey
giving a purpose to life
overloaded with thoughts, with emotions.
...)

These lines seem to invite the reader to join the poet on her quest. In the following poems that are arranged according to the day, month and year each poem is dated, the reader continues to be challenged to find out what the poet is searching for. The poet uses the power of her words like a camera lens to capture snapshots of her life as a traveller in foreign lands, such as in the poem “Setinggan” (Squatter) which portrays life in Madras, India, in 1995, “Monolog Pemandu Teksi” (A Taxi Driver’s Monologue), which is an honest depiction of the life of city dwellers in Kuala Lumpur. The ambience of Bangkok and Pattaya in Thailand is captured in “Antara Wajah-wajah” (Among the Faces), and the observation that Chow Kit Road has changed to resemble Tanah Abang in Indonesia is recorded in the poem “Chow Kit Road”. These are not mere portrayals because they also raise questions that invite the reader to share the experience of being on this quest. One poem that affects the reader greatly is “Jungkar Balik” (Flashback”), where the poet reveals a guilty conscience after scolding a white taxi driver in Iowa, in the United States. Her anger is born out of her resentment against the white colonizers, which she lets out on the taxi driver. However, being Asian, she does feel guilty about her actions.

Further on, the poet meets such characters as the historical figure Chairil Anwar in “Ingatan kepada Chairil” (In Memory of Chairil), and legendary characters such as Shirin and Farhad in “Cinta Farhad kepada Shirin” (Farhad’s Love for Shirin). The poet gives a commentary on these characters and asks about their experiences. It is as if the poet wishes to know what the secret of life is through these real and fictitious characters.

In her quest, the poet also brings up past events such as can be seen in “Serambi” (Verandah), “Padang, Sumatera” (Padang, Sumatra), “Bagaikan Lagu Lama” (Like an Old Song), and “Membeli Semalam” (Buying Yesterday). On the other hand, “Pelarian” (Escape), “Pondicherry” (Pondicherry), “Hujan di Iowa” (Rain in Iowa), “Terkenang Nenda” (Remembering Grandmother), “Di Kubur Datuk” (At Grandfather’s Grave), and “Berpulangnya Hezairul” (Hezairul’s Homecoming), are poems in which Rasiah Halil recalls memories of people who were close to her. In her travels she also is affected by certain places, such as can be seen in “Jalan Ampas” (Ampas Road), “Pulau Ubin” (Ubin Island), “Orang-orang Sunyi” (Lonely People), “Ke Kuala Lumpur” (To Kuala Lumpur), and “Laut Itu” (That Sea).

On the whole, throughout *Nyanyian Si Anak Dagang*, the poet’s quest can be said to be a quest for identity. This quest has its roots in a sense of loss experienced by the poet, similar to the feeling of losing a loved one,

or a place which holds a lot of memories. It is this sense of loss that can be traced in her poems that are full of memories.

What is the relationship between this loss and the poet's search for her identity? This is what makes this collection of poems the expression of the poet's inner self, and perhaps also represents those of Malays who are Rasiah Halil's contemporaries and who were of a similar age when Singapore separated from Malaysia. When Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963, a large number of Malays in Singapore at the time had hoped to be able to retain a shared identity with their brethren on the Peninsula. However, due to a political crisis, Singapore was forced to leave Malaysia and become an independent state. This caused a sense of loss for many Malays in Singapore as it removed them from their homeland, Malaya, which had now been renamed Malaysia.

It is this sense of loss that can be traced in the memories of the poet, for example in "Ke Kuala Lumpur", a poem which leaves a strong impression of a sweet memory that has become bitter, even though it is written in everyday, colloquial language. The poet, through her lines, tries to find an identity not only for herself but on a larger scale for the Malays of Singapore that have become a minority group. In this journey/quest, the poet tries to remember and argue within herself to find an answer to the history that she and her people have had to face.

The answer to the "loss" and "quest" that the poet encounters is also inserted in poems such as "Dari Luar Jendela" (From Outside the Window), "Kemurahan-Mu" (Your Magnanimity), "Siapakah Kita" (Who Are We), and "Di Sisi-Nya" (By God's Side). The poet in the beginning seems to be upset at this 'loss' but at the end she accepts that it is a part of God's plan, as He is the Great Determiner. This can be seen in the poems of the third part of this collection.

However, what is more interesting is that once one has read all the 178 poems in this collection, one realizes that this poet (who, in 1995, took part in the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa in the United States), constantly repeats the phrases "samudera yang besar" (the great ocean), "perahu saya tetap kecil" (my boat remains small) and "sungai, laut dan lautan" (rivers, seas and oceans). All of these phrases are symbolic, with herself being the small boat in the ocean that has left the river of her heritage but who realizes that there is a great ocean which she must sail before she can anchor safely. This is a fact of life, no matter where one is on God's great ocean.

(Translated by Md Syaihan Syafiq Mohd Anuar and Tanja Jonid)