

Malim GHOZALI**A novel chapter and five poems**

From

PROMISES OF PARAMARIMBO

(1990)

ONE

Twilight has arrived as he boarded Naseeb. It is not that important. He could board anything. Hameedia, King Ragga, Watermaster or Schmelly. As long as it safely reaches across, it is good enough. Maratakka II is hopeless, he grunted.

As it had once patiently waited for father, Suriname River is still the same. Like a *silat* master, it is never scared or rattled. Come a thousand foes, he would still be smiling in his sublime stance.

Isn't Siwo Hassan the same?

Allow sometime, I would be like him too!

Obediently the sun lowers itself in the distant horizon. The remnants of its rays danced on the surface of the waves, exhorting a complete and perfect essence of the universe. There are not many passengers that evening. Silently he counted them with his eyes. There are twenty seven altogether, including seven children. Two caged *gelebeks* are added to this figure. At sunrise there were thirty nine. But he knew such a small boat is safe for passengers not exceeding thirty. Not more. With overcrowded passengers and the absence of safety gears, he would not want to visualize what could happen if the boat met with a disaster. Each time he steps into the boat or ferry, he begged for Allah's protection.

The small boat rolled to the left and right side as a result of some playful waves. The boatman let it downstream a bit, riding on the waves so as to reduce its effect. Although the journey only takes about a quarter of an hour, but still manning the boat must be at the hands of a skilled and experienced boatman. He could remember quite clearly seven months ago when a boat capsized, being hit by a cross wind blowing from Commewijne district to Paramaribo. From a manifest of thirty nine passengers, only three survived. After being investigated it was found that the seventeen year old boatman began his career barely two months before the incident. He was among those who survived, as he managed to quickly jump before the capsized boat trapped the passengers. He did not believe the harbormaster is powerless in ensuring the safety of the passenger boats. Perhaps he refuses or simply had no time to enforce it. He readily knew that whoever had a boat and an outboard engine is automatically authorized to gamble his luck and those of his passengers.

The remnants of a German warship straddled the river midstream, like an unwanted whore. Nobody paid any attention to it. It has been its graveyard for the past forty six years. Maybe it is going to be there for the next hundred years. After passing the remnants of the warship, the boat headed upstream for a few minutes before making preparation to land ashore. At the jetty passengers are already eagerly waiting to go to Paramaribo.

He jumped on to the tight jetty, making his way in between the passengers who are rushing to board Naseeb, then turning to the right, towards his favorite stall. Almost daily, unless he is not tied to something back home, he would definitely stop by the stall. A stall that serves his favorite food, *okersoep*. However as long as he could remember, the stall is nameless, not like other stalls. This has never bothered him, anyway. Only once, a long time ago he did ask the proprietor of the stall about it.

“What is it in a name, brother? Service is more important!”

The answer was short and direct to the point. He also knew that the proprietor of the stall is a widow, about his age, living in the vicinity of the river bank. Surprisingly the woman’s grey hair, made her seemed older than her age. Somehow he felt guilty in making such assessment on the woman. Long ago when he stopped for the first time, he addressed her as auntie, more because of her grey hair. The woman just smiled. Since then the title ‘auntie’ remained, though other customers called her Jem. He has never asked for her real name. However since other customers called her Jem, he thought her name would probably be Katijem or Sadijem.

“You’re rather late today, brother Kasan?”

“There’s a lot of work, auntie.”

“Surely, a bank officer has to be.”

“Is nothing like that auntie, lately there is a lot of work. The responsibility in the office has increased, and the job at the association and foundation is far from complete. If it continues, I could go crazy, auntie!”

“Oh, you’re still active with the *silat*, is it?”

Who told auntie so? Kasan himself has never told about his activity at the *silat* association, at least not at the nameless stall. Maybe Baron or Lopeng did. They were the ones who often travelled to and from Paramaribo. Auntie did tell him Baron and Lopeng too favored *okersoep*. Lopeng would not settle for anything less than two helpings. Or maybe the information is passed by the committee members, who came for meetings a couple of times at his house. Surely they must have stopped at auntie’s stall. Probably they might have told her unintentionally.

“The usual one please, auntie.”

“So sorry brother, I haven’t got it today. As of yesterday, it is so difficult to get tapioca at the market. What about *pindasoep*?”

“Well, if there’s no choice, why not.”

Kasan overheard two or three men of Hindustani origin at a table nearby, also ordered the same soup. He thought they must have known that she did not serve *okersoep* today.

“Eat in or take away?” auntie emerged from behind the kitchen door again.

“Take away.”

By her own admission she has a daughter, bigoted from her former husband. Liastri, or Lia as she fondly called her. Nowadays she resides in Holland. She used to send money for her

expenses. She has a permanent job at a government's commercial office in Rotterdam. After completing her studies, she chose to stay there. Kasan did not ask the details of her past marriage, who her husband was and why they broke up. Kasan only inquired about Lia's age. It really surprised Kasan, as according to auntie she is twenty seven years old. Only after auntie told him that she married at a very young age, was Kasan convinced.

“Auntie married Lia's father at the age of twelve. It was pre-arranged by our parents.”

Kasan left the stall owned by the widow who has a head full of grey hairs and some other customers slurping their *pindasoep*, crossed the small road and the bus station toward his car parked by Chi Wan Restaurant. Although approaching two decades, the car has never given any major problem. Friends talked him into buying a new car. Lisberg taunted him, too. But for the time being he is happy with the performance of his car. Come back at ten, or eleven o'clock at night, leave it for three or four days, in the rain or in the sun, his old faithful would still be functional. It is the very same old car which had sent half a dozen would-be mothers from Tamanredjo to deliver at the hospital. Once, even Ponirah almost delivered in the car as she gave birth prematurely.

Luckily she made it to the midwife's house. Indeed he realized man's sixth sense most of the time evaluates superficially and on looks only, he tried to rationalize his friends' behavior.

Before starting the engine, Kasan glanced at the cover of the glove compartment, on his left. There is a sticker with names on it:

Kasan Kromosuwito
Ponirah Djodikromo
D. Redjo Kromosuwito

His old blue car passed swiftly leaving the dirty and dusty Meerzog Jetty. Leaving Suriname River burdened by the passengers coming to and from, behind. He noticed two young men of Javanese origin pitching their *picolets* against each other at a stall selling melons. Which of the *picolet* sings better, he would never know. Kasan looked at the small wing mirror on the right side of his bonnet, as his ears caught a strong engine roar from behind. A bus fully loaded with passengers tried to overtake him. Kasan slowed down, allowing the bus to overtake. Four or five passengers are huddled on the steps.

After leaving the jetty for about fifteen minutes, only then he feels a little relaxed. He has gone through this many times. He cannot imagine whether it is the surroundings that is peaceful, or the abandoned sugarcane and coffee plantations on both sides of the road that project such feelings. While passing the abandoned plantations, his thoughts would normally fly. He took a quick glance outside. White coffee flowers are everywhere. Soon the coffee seeds could be plucked. It is a pity the seeds are never harvested any more these days. All would fall to the ground, feeding the birds and little animals.

Who is to be blamed?

Normally such a question would expand in his thoughts. It would definitely gather other issues. All require answers. *Abangi* has long gone back. All are free to work for themselves and their families. And his clans were purposely brought from the Javanese island to start the coffee and sugar cane plantations. Surely they had inherited some unique skills in such a field. Fattened *abangis* have long retired. But the coffee and sugar cane plantations have long been transformed into bushes. *Abangi* will never come back again. All has passed. History has been written as

such. He always hoped that all this would change. He hoped that the bloom of the coffee flowers would not go to waste, and the sugar cane plantations would enliven again, prolonging the tradition of the past century. As a junior leader, albeit his rejection of the tag, he is trying hard to find a solution to overcome these problems. A small social and agricultural foundation that he headed had shown some signs of success. There are quite a number of farmers from his district that have befriended the earth again, though this time is not about coffee and sugar cane.

“Commewijne needs you, Kasan,” the village head remarked a while ago, at a *pitonan* feast of his relative.

“No. I am the one who needed Commewijne. I shall begin my journey and my search, here,” he responded in his heart.

Dream palaces only existed in the realm of imagination, once a while such mischievous thought negated him. However he could dispel it effectively, and each time it occurred, he became more confident. My dream palace will be strengthened by experience and hard work, and I shall construct it in the real world!

How true were Siwo Hassan’s words, though somewhat jokingly; is it not that all things began from dreams and day dreams?

Kasan realized that such words need transliteration and serious observation. Such transliteration and observation require time and a high level of concentration. Both are not at Kasan’s disposal. All his available time and concentration has to be split into three; the office, *silat* and the foundation. Like a bird, home is only a place for sleeping and resting. Lately *silat* demands a heavy focus. Moreover with the international competition that is going to be hosted by his association, his resting time is further diminished. As a secretary his responsibility is not only voluminous, but detailed. All letter writing to affiliated associations, minutes of meetings and the job of inviting foreign countries fall on his shoulders. As an after thought, he did predict it rightly. There is no more time left for rest or for the family.

“Just marry your *silat*!” taunted Ponirah, when a small quarrel was at its height, a few months ago.

Kasan defended his stand with full authority. To him the foundation and *silat* are not hobbies anymore, but has become his responsibilities to the society and the nation. Look what *silat* has done in such a pluralistic society. Where politics has failed, *silat* has succeeded. Hindustani, Creole, Bush Negro, Negro and Javanese could unite, together chasing the common objective under the auspices of the association, though having differing cultures, religion and belief systems. This requires effort and honesty. If it is taken as a hobby, it will not come anywhere near the aspirations. But Ponirah is so stubborn. Her objective is centered on family prosperity only. There must be time to relax in front of the television, must have time to eat out, must have time for shopping, and must have time for Danial’s friends’ birthday parties. Hah, does this not signify just family prosperity? And he could not accept Ponirah’s reasoning and comparison. Ponirah’s comparisons normally is between the good and the bad, suitable or not, surely only for the family. This reduces choice. Kasan prefers the comparison between the good and the better, for the purpose of meeting perfection. Eventually every discussion with Ponirah ended in a quarrel. Except until now he could still hide what *silat* meant to him from Ponirah: a loud natural music within him!

Kasan stopped his car right in front of Bachan's *Vleeswinkel*. Bruno, the male dog there barked at him two or three times. As though you don't not recognize me and you have been an informal guard there? He spoke to Bruno, before walking inside. He has to buy two kilos of beef. He will charbroil a kilo tonight. Father likes it so much, what more if it is dipped in chili and ketchup. There are three cucumbers left and the maid could thinly slice them as appetizers. Should there be tapioca he will ask the maid to prepare *okersoep*. He would give a kilo to Ponirah. She can cook it to her liking.

"Up again?"

"Look's so."

"How much is it, now?"

"Twenty *guilders*."

"Last week it was eighteen. Two weeks ago it was fifteen."

"It is not easy to get cows nowadays. Brother knows the transportation cost from Saramacca, right? Furthermore the rebels are creating havoc to the farmers."

The reason given was logical enough, if it was only for the purpose of giving an answer. Transportation costs, rebels, fear and therefore prices go up. Hah!

Kasan stepped out while carrying his beef. Bruno barked again, twice, before wagging its stubby tail, and lied again in front of the *vleeswinkel*.

He placed the beef on the back seat. He should not have asked the price from the *vleeswinkel*. Just pay. By doing so there would not be any heartache. The price is sure to rise. Up and up. When would it go down, becomes a big question mark to all who consume chicken, mutton and beef in Tamanredjo.

Bachan is smart at making money. His *vleeswinkel* is getting larger. When he started, he had only one helper, a black youth. Now he has three. Meera, a pretty girl, so easy with her smile, did make the customers happy, too. Do not worry about prices. Just pay. Kasan thought; did Bachan slaughter cows or humans? Maybe to Bachan there is no difference.

Only three quarter of the journey has been covered. From afar the sun has just begun to kiss the roof of the jungles, which stretches as far as the eyes could see.

Glossary:

Maghrib : prayer at early part of night

Pindasoep : a kind of soup made from groundnuts

Okersoep : a kind of soup made from tapioca

Abangi : blood sucker

Salam : greetings among the Muslims

Gelebek : a kind of bird

Masya-Allah : O my God

Picolet : a kind of bird

Vleeswinkel : butcher's shop

Guilder : Suriname guilder
Silat : martial arts of the Malays and people of the Malay Archipelago, including the Javanese

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Puisi tengah hari

palma temiring
 langkahlah anak batu
 kolam tanpa air tanpa ikan
 menitipkan walang rindu
 meski ternoda pualam
 dalam diam

akasia meluruhkan
 dedaunan
 ke merah tanah
 menganyam syair tanpa nama
 mengunci seribu erti
 di tiang hari

menunggu apakah aku di sini
 menjauh di benang waktu
 kalian tidak mengerti
 belum kutulis
 puisi tengahari

Foodcourt, Precinct 8
 Putrajaya
 3.3.06

Noon poem

*slanting palms
 just avoid the pebbles
 fishless pond
 sending painful longings
 and the rapture of nature's beauty
 in silence*

*an acacia sheds its leaves
 fallen on reddish earth
 spinning a nameless poem
 concealing a thousand meanings
 right here, at noon*

*what am I waiting for
 yearning in timelessness
 don't you know
 I'm yet to write
 my noon poem*

*Foodcourt, Precinct 8
 Putrajaya
 3.3.06*

umang-umang

dia tidak lagi takut
 atau menghiraukau laut
 yang saban hari menghantarkan
 tenang biru
 kelam hitam
 dan merah darah
 ke pasir pasir dan ke bukit-bukit

pagi telah membukakan jendela berahi
 ombak dan pantai tak bisa terpisah
 terkulai dalam gemersik angin
 sedang nelayan mimpikan jerung
 menyambar anak gadisnya di halaman

kala itu dia tahu kulit siput adalah kecopong
 menyembunyikan siasah dan taktik perang

dia tidak lagi takut
 ketika menarik picu untuk membunuh.

Sungai Rokam
 Ipoh
 11.11.06

shell stealer

*he is not scared not anymore
 or feel for the seas
 day by day sending
 bluish calm
 black is the colour of darkness
 and bloody red
 to the sands and the hills*

*morning has opened the windows of desire
 the unseperable waves and the shores
 powerless in the dance of the winds
 while the fisherman dreamt of a shark
 snatching his daughter before him*

*then he knew sea shells are battle armors
 hiding the politics and war tactics*

*he is not scared not anymore
 when pulling the trigger to kill*

*Sungai Rokam
 Ipoh
 11.11.06*

sudah lama kulihat kau cemara

sudah lama kulihat kau cemara
 tak jemu mencumbu pantai
 menghantar buih ke pasir
 sudah lama kulihat kau ombak
 tak pernah tandakmu keliru
 ditimang segara biru

kita akan bersama lagi dua malam
 tak kubenarkan benakku tenggelam
 bersama gamitan sang nelayan
 tak kukenal tampang

seen you long enough, pines

*seen you long enough, pines
 never tired caressing the shores
 sending waves to the sands
 seen you long enough, waves
 never slipping your dance steps
 swung by the blue oceans*

*for two nights we would be together again
 I won't drown my feelings
 to the calls of unknown fishermen
 so friendly*

lembut lambaian itu
tetap seperti dulu:
santun budaya melayu

*just like the bygone years:
the sublime Malay culture*

sudah lama kulihat kau cemara
entah bila lagi
kita berjumpa.

*seen you long enough, pines
don't know when
we'll meet again.*

Pantai Batu Buruk,
Kuala Terengganu
7.6.06.

*Pantai Batu Buruk,
Kuala Terengganu
7.6.06.*

sembang-sembang suatu petang

an afternoon chat

sembang-sembang suatu petang
melayan teman yang datang jarang
waktu pun terbang bersama ruang
dan peluang
gugur kelopak melor di sudut halaman
jatuh juga putih rambut temanku
dan putih misai dan janggutku
luruhnya zaman galak ketawa remaja
alangkah manisnya

*an afternoon chat
with a long-time friend
the space and time
and lost opportunities
fallen like petals of jasmine to the ground
my friend's grey hair
and my beard has fallen too
the teenage happy years
so fulfilling*

sembang-sembang suatu petang
melayan teman yang datang jarang
sambil minum kopi makan tepung udang
segera mengenang
berapa lagi cucu yang akan dibilang.

*an afternoon chat
with a long time friend
sipping coffee and eating prawn fritters
thinking of how many more grandchildren
coming on the way.*

Damansara Utama
Kuala Lumpur
16.7.06.

*Damansara Utama
Kuala Lumpur
16.7.06*

malam III

malam ketiga
 serakah ribut mengganas
 persis cumulusnimbus tersadai akhirnya
 di lereng-lereng bukit kapur
 menggugurkan kehidupan yang kauangkat
 dari segala laut dan selat
 lalu menumbuhkan benih-benih

malam pertama
 menelanjangi kasur
 membahasakan perkahwinan
 dan deriaku tak pernah pangen
 mencari denai itu.

Kota Damansara

the third night

the third night
violent storm tearing away
it finally whimpered like cumulus nimbus
on the sides of limestone hills
showering hope that it picked up
from all oceans and straits
hence enlivening the seedlings

the third night
shearing a bed
consuming the language of love
and I have never once forgotten
the trail.

Kota Damansara
