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***Visions of Eco-Apocalypse in Selected Malaysian
Poetry in English: Cecil Rajendra and
Muhammad Haji Salleh***

By:

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Selected
Title: Visions of Eco-apocalypse in Malaysian Poetry in English: Cecil Rajendra and Muhammad Haji Salleh

Abstract: This essay examines the apocalyptic visions of two Malaysian poets writing in English, Cecil Rajendra and Muhammad Haji Salleh, with special emphasis on ecological catastrophe and environmental wastelands. Rajendra's vision highlights human accountability and the ethical aspects of environmental destruction while underlying Muhammad's vision of a fragmented earth is the gradual loss of the Malays' unique ecological consciousness and inheritance. Clearly, although each poet may approach the notion of world's end from different perspectives, both express grave concerns about the environmental and cultural impact of a rapidly changing Malaysian landscape.

Keywords: apocalypse, wasteland, responsibility, Malay, nature

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An overview of Malaysian poetry written in English reveals that although poets are generally more preoccupied with metaphorical rather than material nature, the environmental subtext underscores an implicit concern for the land and the shifting relation between people and the land. This "green" concern manifests itself in ways ranging from forthright protest against the environmental impact of rapid urbanization and industrialization to mythical expressions of the individual's sense of place in the real world. For one thing, the concept of a secular apocalypse has been and continues to be a

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powerful trope for Malaysian poets in their contemplation of all manner of crises in both the local and global contexts. In their engagement with the ecological crisis, Malaysian poets evoke apocalyptic wastelands in their works to communicate a palpable sense of imminent ecological cataclysm. Underlying the rhetoric of destruction and desolation are a warning against an unqualified, unenlightened anthropocentrism and the clarion call, direct or implied, for environmental justice, sustainability and enhanced stewardship of the land. Furthermore, it can be inferred that, in overtly or covertly challenging the dominant master narrative of development, these third-world poets take the radical view of political dissent because environmental issues are political issues, even more so in a developing nation. In this essay, I will discuss the apocalyptic visions of two poets, namely, Cecil Rajendra and Muhammad Haji Salleh. While Muhammad Haji Salleh's vision and tacit warning of the end are tied up with his concern for the Malays' eroding sense of place in nature, Cecil Rajendra's barren and ruined landscapes register humanity's eroding sense of responsibility towards both the human and nonhuman.

The first poem I wish to consider is Rajendra's "Art for Art's Sake" from the volume *Bones & Feathers*, which is a hard-hitting indictment of the self-indulgent pursuit of art for art's sake as the title suggests. Lawyer and social activist Rajendra has often been criticized for producing artless verse that has no other intent apart from protest¹ against hunger, poverty, exploitation and environmental degradation, all of which are interrelated and are often consequences of injustice, corruption and myopic political and economic agendas. His poems on ecological ruin are a direct, unambiguous diatribe against the processes which are precipitating this disaster. In this particular poem and in a defiant mood, the speaker makes no bones about the futile aesthetic preoccupations of

poetry when all is destroyed and a devastated nature is the only thing left standing. In the first half of the poem, the speaker, in an ironic tone, exhorts the saving of poetry from becoming a mere tool in the hands of activists and propagandists: "Let us rescue poetry / from the barbarians / Those who would reduce / it to a flag, a slogan / a vehicle for propaganda" (*Bones* 67). However, the second half destabilizes the proposal with its doomsday imagery and conscience-pricking challenge in the form of a rhetorical question:

Yes, let us give [poetry] back
its noble stature
and enshrine it in
its rightful sanctum
sanctorum of culture

But when the last leaf
quivers to the hot earth
from the last
chemical-riddled tree
and the last grasshopper
limps away into the sun
and the last beleaguered
ant-eater turns halt-
ingly towards the sea
and the last songbird
plummets from its
ash-gloved perch
and the last soldier
twitches in his ditch
and the last oil-slick
moves in to devour
the last of our beaches
who will explain
"Art for art's sake"
to the gasping fishes? ("Art for Art's Sake", *Bones* 67-8)

The conventional apocalyptic images of aridity, irreversible degradation and pervasive lifelessness are reinforced by the repetition of the adjective "last". The last signifies the end; here, the end is so utterly final that even one of the causes of the ecological crisis itself ("the last oil-slick") draws to an end. It is striking that the only human participant in

this bleak series of "lasts" is a soldier. Although this image comes as no surprise, given Rajendra's vocal denouncement of war, it is especially forceful in the sense that the soldier represents yet another destructive human event. As such, the poem piles one form of domination atop another, intensifying the bleak atmosphere of apocalyptic annihilation and exacerbating the extent of the tragedy. The poem's argument is based on the assumption that fishes (and the rest of nature) *do* matter, and the idea that fishes will demand an explanation of the guilty party when the end happens is in line with one of Lawrence Buell's structures of environmental perception that shapes eco-apocalyptic works (albeit American works). Buell states that one of the "key ingredients" of environmental apocalyptic vision is "equality of members" among the biotic community:

As Leopold's definition of community suggests [the land ethic conceives the land as a community of soils, waters, plants, animals and people], interrelatedness implies also equality of members, . . . If like Thoreau one imagines animals as neighbors; if like Muir or traditional Native Americans one imagines life-forms as plant people, sun youths, or grandmother spiders, then the killing of flies becomes as objectionable as the killing of humans. (Buell 303)

Leopold asserts that "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (Leopold 204). Rajendra's poem suggests that trees, grasshoppers, ant-eaters, songbirds, soldiers and fishes are equal members; if fishes are neighbours or fellow-members of the community, then a sense of neighbourly responsibility, justice and respect is owed to them.

The suggestion that "gasping fishes" do not care much for lofty human pursuits when their lives are endangered is also Rajendra's way of shaming and warning the human perpetrators of ecological ruin. In his discussion of the tragic mode in Rachel

Carson's apocalyptic work *Silent Spring*, and drawing from Stephen O'Leary's masterful analysis of millennial rhetoric, Greg Garrard notes:

The warning is presented in terms of absolute authority; the material threat is "evil", and so, by association, are the authors of it; the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic, and the danger is not only imminent, but already well under way. (Garrard 95)

In "Art for Art's Sake", the wrongfulness or "evil" implied in actions which have led to "the hot earth", "chemical-riddled tree" and "ash-gloved tree" is matched on the other side with the wrongfulness of relegating ecological activism to the bottom rung in a hierarchy of poetic priorities. The persona may not speak with "absolute authority" but he/she does so with absolute conviction. In the poem, the consequences of not heeding the warning are obviously catastrophic, and the downward slide to collapse has already been set in motion as suggested by a sequence culminating with "the last" one. Additionally, in this poem and in others like "Hiroshima", "No Celebratory Song", "Tourists, Transistors or Stones", "When the Tourists Flew In" and "The Endau-Rompin Aftermath?", Rajendra's discourse certainly conforms to the tragic mode of apocalyptic rhetoric in that his universe is split down the middle between two camps, namely, the oppressors (typically Capital, the businessman, foreign Multinationals, Industrial giants, entrepreneurs, etc.) and their victims (typically farmers, fishermen, the poor, the marginalized, the dispossessed and the displaced) so that "[t]he tragic actor . . . has little to do but choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil" (Garrard 87).

The poem "Kuala Juru – Death of a Village", further enlarges on the eco-apocalyptic theme and demonstrates some of the above rhetorical strategies. It focuses on a specific place, a village, which is the embodiment of a traditional existence more in harmony with the natural world. In the riverine, agrarian geography of Malaysia, place-

names follow that of the river: "Kuala Juru" means "mouth of the Juru river". In this poem, the river is said to be the source of sustenance for many and the life-support of the village itself. However, this river and its environs have been reduced to a wasteland, and the catastrophe is all around:

Here
intimations of death
hang
heavy in the air
Everywhere
there is the stench
of decay and despair

The river
strangled by
exigencies
of industrialisation
is dying . . .
and nobody cares

.....

And so
a once-proud village
sustained
for centuries
by the richness
of this river
dies . . .
and nobody cares . . .

("Kuala Juru – Death of a Village", *Bones* 90-01; first and third ellipses in original text)

It can be argued that the central theme of this poem is not the death of the village but apathy. The evil author of this evil material threat is twofold: human apathy and human greed. The poem condemns this avarice: "To that mammon / DEVELOPMENT / our high-priests / sacrifice / our customs / our culture / our traditions / and environment / and nobody cares" ("Kuala Juru – Death of a Village", *Bones* 91). Here, Mammon as the source of evil and corruption and a false god (to whom the environment and a whole way of life are sacrificed) is identified with development. The evils of apathy are also taken up in the poem "Apathy", which takes to task the affluent members of a developing nation in which the gap between the rich and the poor is unconscionably wide. In this poem, the

guilt associated with the evil of social indifference to the injustices around us is expressed in these lines: "Conscience pickled in vodka / when Armageddon comes / how will you explain your / indifference to your Maker" ("Apathy", *Bones* 5)?

Rajendra's apocalyptic imagination is sharpened by what he perceives to be the root cause of economic injustice (committed by unscrupulous businessmen and industrialists and "Multinationals / licensed to run / amuck across this land" ["No Celebratory Song", *Bones* 55]) and the other concomitant ills of progress such as ecological despoliation. Apathy is the culprit and so is the absence of a conscience, including an ecological conscience. Rajendra habitually conceives of the guilt and evil of apathy in apocalyptic terms, but this *eschaton* is also a day of reckoning. In a recurring motif, those culpable must be made accountable to both their equal fellow-members and their Maker. Here and elsewhere, the poet consistently envisions Armageddon and wastelands which paradoxically do not end there. Judgment day or not, the unethical wrong must be righted as this next poem emphasizes.

In "No Celebratory Song", Rajendra groups all his causes, many of them interlinked, in one poem: injustice when "car-parks / take precedence over hospitals / Multi-storeyed hotels / over homes for people"; injustice when "Law comes before Justice", injustice when "the poet is debased / and the businessman praised"; injustice when "foreign investors / devastate our estate / and the voice of Capital / speaks louder than the pleas of fishermen". The ecological cause takes up the culminating stanzas:

So long
as blind bulldozers
are allowed unchecked
to gouge our landscape
and Multinationals
licensed to run
amuck across this land

I shall
sing no celebratory song

So long
as our rivers & streams
our beaches, our air
our oceans & trees
our birds, our fish
our butterflies & bees
are strangled, stifled
polluted, poisoned
crushed, condemned . . .
by lop-sided development

I shall
sing no celebratory song ("No Celebratory Song", *Bones* 55; ellipsis in original text)

Throughout the poem, the repeated refrain "I shall / sing no celebratory song / no matter / how many suns go down / This tongue / will be of thistle and thorn / until they right the wrong" implicitly demands that the offenders be held responsible for their offences against the land and the land-as-community. It also implies that nature has a biotic right to exist. In the poem "The Endau-Rompin² Aftermath?", the diction and war imagery used to describe the aftermath of the rainforests's destruction by logging are disturbing in the sense that a personified, defeated nature intensifies the pathos of the carnage; it encourages thinking about the nonhuman participants as mute, defenceless, hapless victims in a war-cum-ecocide not of their own making: "the *widowed* wind howling / ... a pangolin *stumbles* / around *amputated* trunks / an *orphaned* butterfly / surveys the *wounded* jungle" (*Bones* 92; emphases added). It also induces empathy on the part of the human reader. In all this, echoes of Leopold's argument for a land ethics in *A Sand County Almanac* reverberate in Rajendra's environmental poetry: "One basic weakness in a conservation system based wholly on economic motives is that most members of the land community have no economic value" (Leopold 210).

Robin Morris Collin states that "[t]he Apocalypse seems an understandable response to an explosive desire to unshackle ourselves from systems which have become corrupt and dysfunctional. The Apocalyptic vision is a comprehensive, visceral response to that realization" (2-3). Rajendra's protest verse certainly highlights these "corrupt and dysfunctional" systems. The corrupt or misguided political and economic structures contributing to adverse environmental change in Malaysia are everywhere evident in Rajendra's poems: unchecked capitalist development and resource exploitation in the form of Irrelevant factories", "foreign investors", "blind bulldozers" and "Multinationals" ("No Celebratory Song", *Bones* 55) are linked with nationalist ambitions for the country and the enriching of the political and economic élites, the "nouveau riche / & the bourgeoisie" ("Gold-tinted Spectacle", *Bones* 140) living off the fat of the land. The implications of "lop-sided development" ("No Celebratory Song", *Bones* 55) are uneven distribution of wealth, poverty and hunger: "Besides having to fight / these Big Businesses / and Multinationals / the citizens of hunger / have to contend also / with twisted politicians / purblind clergy / corrupt Generals / and the fat greasy men / who traffic in human misery" ("The Continent of Hunger", *Bones* 10-11). In "When the Tourists Flew In", the Ministries of Finance, the Interior and Culture are lampooned for their skewed ideas of progress for the people.

Michael Parnwell and Raymond Bryant have commented on the "interaction of politics and ecology" in Southeast Asia and how the region, "more than anywhere else in the developing world" is where "the contradictions between environment and development, economic growth and environmental conservation, are visible, and inform the political process". Southeast Asia

with its explosive mix of rapid but uneven economic growth and pervasive environmental degradation, is a region in which many of the political issues and problems associated with sustainable development and environmental change can be clearly seen. (2)

Parnwell and Bryant also note that "the persistence today of practices such as large-scale logging and dam construction in the face of local, national and international popular protest serves to emphasize that, however important [NGOs and grassroots organizations] may be, these actors do not determine the course of events" and that these actors are themselves "an outcome of a complex political process in which diverse and often competing groups seek to influence how the environment is changed, and in whose interest" (10). In "Hothouse Anachronisms", these "competing groups" are alluded to while it is clear that the poet is on the side of the underdog and the usual suspects. In the poem, the speaker speaks out on the side of slash-and-burn farmers, long vilified for their traditional methods of land-clearing for crop cultivation:

"Slash and Burn Vandals"
they
branded us
in treatise, journal, book
and exegesis,
And yes, we confess we
were guilty
of felling trees to meet our
daily needs:
fuel to simmer our gruel,
on cold nights
firewood to keep us warm . . .

But vandals
we never were, we never
took
any more
than absolute essentials.
Never!
Yet, "Slash and Burn
Vandals" they branded us
in treatise
after treatise, book, journal,
exegesis . . .
the well-intentioned
environmentalists in the

metropolis. (reproduced in Addison 4; ellipses in original text)

In this next poem, Rajendra's eco-apocalypse characteristically interweaves destructive environmental practices with racial politics and imperialism; in the mushroom cloud-shaped poem "Hiroshima", the actual nuclear holocaust for the people of Hiroshima is re-enacted each time nuclear testing is conducted in areas inhabited by coloured peoples:

HIROSHIMA
SAHARA MURUROA
not for nothing are
WESTERN NUCLEAR TESTS
safely subterranean when
conducted in their own regions
but never
underground
wherever
people are
YELLOW
BLACK
or BROWN (*Bones* 44)

As an indictment against environmental racism, this poem, with its tacit critique of the imperialist attitudes displayed in the arms race during the cold-war era and even today, is also a stark reminder of the imperialism that had once ravaged a large part of the formerly colonized world. In postcolonial Malaysia, the political and economic focus on resource exploitation and its immense impact on the environment is a legacy of the British (Parnwell and Bryant 8). In his discussion of resource politics in colonial Southeast Asia, Raymond Bryant notes that colonialism may have built its economic bases on older, precolonial networks of trade and resource use but "the sheer scale and intensity of resource exploitation marked out the colonial era from earlier periods". Consequently, Southeast Asia became "dependent on large-scale resource exploitation for its economic well-being" (Bryant 31):

The colonial powers re-organised and expanded pre-colonial patterns of resource use so that by the end of colonial rule, commercial resource exploitation was central to economic life in the region. . . . Beginning in some areas as early as the eighteenth century, but intensifying throughout the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, vast forested tracts were felled for timber, but mainly to permit permanent agriculture. Cleared land was used to produce such commercial crops as coffee, tea, rubber, sago, oil-palm, rice, abaca and sugarcane. Concurrently, in areas not dedicated to permanent agriculture, colonial rule encouraged long-term timber and mineral exploitation.

(Bryant 30-01)

As such, environmental problems "have their roots in the economic policies of the industrial and imperial ages" and postcolonial communities have inherited "the most insidious legacy of the extract-consume-pollute policies of the past: externalizing pollution onto nature and vulnerable people, and racism as an ideology justifying brutality and privilege" (Collin 3-4). In *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben writes that "[t]he invention of nuclear weapons may actually have marked the beginning of the end of nature: we possessed, finally, the capacity to overmaster nature, to leave an indelible imprint everywhere all at once" (70). For Rajendra, the end of nature is indeed well underway in test-sites and regions where tyrannical dualisms like Western/Eastern, white/coloured, male/female, civilized/savage, progress/regression, First-world/Third-world, colonizer/colonized and culture/nature continue to justify the domination and persecution of humans and nonhumans alike.

Lawrence Buell asserts that "the metaphor of apocalypse [is] central to ecocentrism's projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web" (Buell 285). It can be argued that, for Rajendra, eco-catastrophe and its malevolence can only be averted by means of social transformation. The immoral, public apathy towards the hungry, the dispossessed and widespread ecological damage needs to be rectified, and, arguably, this can only happen

when an ethical approach to economics, politics and ecology takes root in the consciousness of people.

It is really no wonder that apocalyptic discourse serves the purposes of poet-activist Rajendra well: the desire to unshackle ourselves from the legacy of colonial exploitation and contemporary *postcolonial* rapacity is indeed explosive. In "The Endau-Rompin Aftermath?", the devastated jungle and decimated animals are not the only aftermath of the entrepreneurs' onslaught; left in its wake is a potent rage which may erupt at any moment in apocalyptic fury: "no words can fill / this gash of malevolence / but a terrible anger squats / hugging its knees in silence" (*Bones* 93). For Rajendra, "the moral obligation and bounden duty of every responsible writer" is to give voice to the dispossessed (both human and nonhuman) and "to bear witness to the times he lives in" (qtd. in Addison 7). Certainly for Rajendra, this has inevitably meant assuming the role of a doomsday prophet.

The next poet I wish to discuss, Muhammad Haji Salleh, also obliquely revisits the environmental devastation associated with large-scale, fast-paced, relentless colonial resource exploitation and environmental racism. In "standing in oxford street", the speaker ponders over the colonial past as he stands in oxford street, at the very commercial heart of the former metropolitan centre of the British Empire: "how shall we taste / its riches / built from the blood / of the black, red, brown and yellow peoples" (*Rowing Down Two Rivers* 116). The speaker hits out mockingly at the "tourists from the colonies" who "[worship] the english" (their former colonial masters) and "live with their values". The last stanza is particularly striking:

standing in oxford street
i imagine
the collapse of their imitators

fallen under
the arrogant
dying giant. (*Rowing* 117; emphasis added)

Here, in my view, is a warning of ecological collapse among, firstly, "imitators" of the empire or those countries with imperialist aspirations, and secondly, those former colonies who must now bear the high environmental cost left in the wake of conquest in their independent, postcolonial countries and perpetuated by economic values ("live with their values") which have been passed from colonizer to the former colonies. The irony is trenchant in the sense that the "giant" conqueror is itself dying and so too may its worshippers and former possessions.

On the whole, Muhammad's vision of apocalypse is tantamount to a compelling warning about the threat that will affect not only the natural world and cultures which depend on its continued survival but also the distinctly Malay consciousness of nature. Muhammad's poetic preoccupations are the Malays (a people who have inhabited the land- and seascapes of the Malay Archipelago and lived traditionally by the rhythms of the natural world for centuries) and the question of Malay identity and heritage which is inextricably linked with the earth's identity. In noting "the centrality of the forest to the Malays", Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells observes that "[a]s a result of the late advent of development in the Peninsula, rich vestiges of a forest-dominated cultural heritage survived into the modern period" (*Nature and Nation* 9). Notably, the city-country dichotomy is a prevalent leitmotif in Muhammad's poetry; in many poems, the country is the preferred existence (undoubtedly, due to its proximity to the forest) because "the city encircles/ a thin existence, / a river of acid flows near at hand. / it's not possible to build a civilisation / on the promises of trade or barter / or over the mine's sand" ("this too is my

earth" *Rowing* 124). The country is where the village or "*kampung* sanctuary" is; this village refuge lies "at the root of traditional Malay institutional structures" and "[serves] as the metaphor for Malay cultural heritage" (Kathirithamby-Wells 292). Nonetheless, in the face of rapid socio-economic changes, there is also the poet's acknowledgement that "this city is my home, / these buildings my walls, / these streets my floor / and the people my family" ("the city is my home", *Rowing* 154).

In Muhammad's poetry, the relationship between traditional Malay society and the natural world is one of familiarity, acceptance and humility. There is a sense of acceptance that survival depends on nature's bounty and acceptance that nature is infinitely larger than the infinitesimal, puny humans who eke a living from land and sea.

it rained all day today
over our attap
soaking our small huts.
we sat by the window
reading the water-curtain
across our petty desires.

two small souls
huddled together
in an ocean of rain
that buoys up our cork-house,
we are ferried
into acceptance. ("it rained all day today", *Rowing* 146)

Arrogant human dominion over nature is in reverse order in the Malay cosmos: the fishers with their "fragile perahus" are "dessicated toys" burnt by "the heavy sun" ("dungun fishermen", *Rowing* 155), and everywhere the fragility of human life ("a papery self" ["night rain", *Rowing* 42]) at the mercy of the elements is reinforced. The "sky often drives them to prayer" ("villagers", *Rowing* 178) and indeed weather events are of momentous significance to the farmer, the fishers and the villagers who have learnt to rely on nature's predictable cycles of death and renewal. Familiarity with an unyielding, brutal, terrifying, capricious, and yet predictable nature may yet afford a sense of

security: "we are no longer afraid of the rain. / living with monsoons, / we have learnt that / familiar water / seeps easy into damp lives" ("flooded", *Rowing* 184) and "villagers are patient readers / of the lessons of earth sky and water". The lessons include: "earth dries in drought / breaks the tapioca or corn", "gentler mud loves people", "winds cool their nights / and blow their boats to fishing grounds", "rain freshens age, / fertilises frog eggs on withering grasses". These "lessons swim / in their eyes, arteries / or words" ("villagers", *Rowing* 178-79). The lessons learnt presumably induce the human submission to nature's forces, including that of "the water's will" ("rain", *Rowing* 30).

It is these climatic patterns that assure, placate and edify; however, there are signs that this age-old nature-human relationship has become eroded. Glimpses of uncertainty in nature's rhythms are apparent. Unprecedented severe, extended droughts and monsoonal rains have begun to be a source of anxiety. The "earth is / changed in its essence, / man has declared war / on nature. / the past / and the present selves / must live as neighbours, / with the change, / or break without solutions" ("return" *Rowing* 239). In relation to this and as a consequence of development, the gulf between city (epitomized by "the present [self]") and country ("the past [self]") has widened. The village sanctuary is fast disappearing as older, traditional patterns of agriculture and villages are replaced with state-engineered plantation agriculture and settlements. In contrast to the story-teller who is "rooted to earth" and "implanted . . . in the marshes", the "i" in the poem is "this young man who has lost his place" ("story", *Rowing* 237-38). Muhammad's silent spring in response to the "crisis of a changing rural landscape" (Kathirithamby-Wells 293) and by implication, its attendant environmental impact, is conveyed in these lines: "the village is *quiet* / behind a lalang³ weed fence / asleep through *the long heat*, / birds are

muted / by the new harshness" ("the quiet village", *Rowing* 193; emphases added). "Life there [in the *kampung*], interposed between the forest and the river, represented the inherent tension between the kindness and cruelty of nature, heightened by new economic challenges" (Kathirithamby-Wells 292), but a quiet, deserted village signifies that these challenges have snuffed out its very life. Kathirithamby-Wells adds: "The landscape of rice fields and orchards, melding into the forest edge, represents a way of life that could not be replicated away from the familiar contours and colours of nature" (293). In the poem "prayer", the arid wasteland conveys a feeling of being abandoned by nature itself:

we are in a dry desert

 prayers are personal
 with my hands I shape a raw cup
 waiting for rain,

 we have few words,
 our breaths are short.
 memory only remembers oneself,
 once comfortable,
 deserted by the river.

 my eyes are scared by the red dust,
 it's night
 and the rain has not come. ("prayer", *Rowing* 141)

The poem which best captures the effects of deforestation on the climate is "the forest's last day" where the apocalypse is portrayed in terms of nature's absolute defeat in humanity's war on nature: "fallen is the cengal / fallen is the meranti / fallen is the merbau⁴ . . . " and the land is reduced to "the red desiccated desert". Here, the speaker laments over the fallen trees of the forest and warns of "the world of the future":

death comes at the end of the chain saw

 family of trees aged by the centuries
 the beautiful and great lying in the shadow
 with a presence in the root's fibers and shoots' sway.
 heat rushes into the air tunnel, existence is scalded.

the wheel of nature turns slowly
listening to the rhythm of the season and sun
with a sense of presence in the roots and the sway of the shoots

after the death shatter and scatter of roots
heat rushes into the tunnel, searing existence.

.....
with the rustle tenderness drips from shoots
the secret mist of nature evaporates thinly
the frame of balance is broken, since trees became earth
the quiet beauty filtered by light fades out,
leaves are dumb, branches speechless, no song, no echo
no deer, no baboon, no elephant herd
no pulse of mousedeer's bleat, no question.

the full epic of the forest
is ended by a convoy of lorries with tyres of concrete,
a gang of paid lumberjacks who wear no pity in their eyes.

and a bloated logger
who stands on *the red desiccated desert* –
the world of the future ("the forest's last day", Rowing 49-51; emphases added)

The poem is ominously accurate in its portrayal of increased temperature with the destruction of each forest tree. The "air tunnel" into which "heat rushes", "[scalding]" and "searing existence" suggests that the void left in the wake of every fallen forest tree functions to multiply heat, as indeed the felling of carbon-absorbing trees will mean that more greenhouse gases remain in the atmosphere. An eerie silence pervades the wasteland: "the full epic of the forest" composed of plant and animal noise is silenced. In this poem, the fallen-ness of the trees and the vanishing forests also mark the fallen-ness of a civilization built upon the Malay vision of nature with its folkloric, animistic beliefs: "Anthropomorphic perceptions of nature among the aboriginal and Malay communities manifested the close bond between people and forests, supporting belief in a shared vital force or soul" (Kathirithamby-Wells 9). It seems reasonable to say that the poem implies that the nature/forest-dominated cultural heritage of the Malays stands shaken at its foundations: the human-environment relationship which once supported life and death on the basis of acceptance, familiarity and humility (and we might add respect and faith) is

rendered unstable. The "frame of balance is broken", and things fall apart: "[the forest's] world overturns familiarity", "the moon falls, caught by the branches / as light that sketches difference, / morning falls, the afternoon and the night" ("the forest's last day", *Rowing* 49, 50). The Malay concept of "nature" was influenced by the "pervasiveness of the Peninsula's forests"; "nature" was "perceived in the pre-modern era as synonymous with the world / universe (*alam*)" (Kathirithamby-Wells 11). Going by this concept, the forest's last day is essentially the world's last day. The final image we are left with is iconic of destructive and rapacious environmental change in tropical Malaysia: the "bloated logger" and the red, arid and empty wasteland, a travesty of the tropics with its connotations of ancient rainforests, biodiversity and lush greenery. In all, it can be said that the poet calls for the restoration of "the frame of balance" in the human-environment relationship and greater care for the "soul and ways" of the earth. For the poet, the plain fact is that "though its face is plated in plastic / rushing to the rhythm of the machine", "this too is [his] earth":

i want my earth fecund
black with life's essence.

this too is my earth,
whose soul and ways
must be rendered tender. ("this too is my earth", *Rowing* 124-25; emphases added)

This essay has attempted to show how at least two Malaysian poets are addressing the ecological crisis with apocalyptic urgency and a tremendous sense of responsibility. Indeed, loss of biodiversity and increasing toxicity in the lives of both urban and rural Malaysians are spectres which continue to haunt not only writers but also the ordinary citizens of the land. As the nation moves doggedly forward in its aspiration to achieve

developed or industrialized status by 2020, poets like Rajendra and Muhammad and many others will justifiably persist with their jeremiads and warnings of the world's end.

ENDNOTES

1. See Fernando, 1978: xv-xx.
2. The Endau-Rompin National Park is the second largest protected rainforest complex in Peninsular Malaysia and is home to the endangered Sumatran rhinoceros. Before the National Parks Act of Malaysia was passed in 1980, tropical rainforests like Endau-Rompin had always been threatened by logging and other human activities. Even after it was declared a National Park, logging continued to jeopardize parts of the reserve. The poem captures some of the controversy and outcry related to the issue: "i hear tall trees crashing . . . i hear sawmills buzzing / cash registers clicking . . . i hear of press conferences / of petitions, of signatures / of campaigns & lobbying / but no words will come . . . the rhino is boxed & crated / merbok & meranti are gone . . ." ("The Endau-Rompin Aftermath?", *Bones* 92).
3. "Lalang" is a weedy grass commonly found in Malaysia.
4. "Cengal", "meranti" and "merbau" are Malay names for the different species of trees. In the poem, many other tree species are identified by their local names.

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