

Winner of
the Cultural
Medallion

THE
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a novel

translated
by
**ALFIAN
SA'AT**

ISA
KAMARI

The Tower

a novel

ISA KAMARI

THE
TOWER
WE
ARE

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Translated from the Malay by Alfian Sa'at

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Sukma, Dhuha and Iman

Translator's Note

ISA KAMARI'S NOVEL *The Tower* is essentially a parable about man's spiritual quest in an increasingly materialistic world. The Malay title *Menara* suggests both a tall structure as well as a minaret (like that of a mosque).

While the story has the simplicity and lucidity of a parable, the storytelling is much more complex. There is an arboreal quality reminiscent of how a wayang kulit puppeteer might narrate a version of the *Ramayana*, in Malay known as the *Hikayat Seri Rama*. There is the main narrative, known as the *cerita pokok* (the trunk story) and then the offshoots known as the *cerita ranting* (the branch stories).

During these *cerita ranting*, the storyteller often adds his own improvisations, indigenising the characters and situations, making references to contemporary issues, and sometimes even making jokes, cheerfully entwining the high and the low, the sacred and the profane.

While the main narrative spine of *The Tower* involves a physical ascent, there is also a parallel journey, a kind of upward spiral through various layers of self-knowledge and transcendence. Along this vertical path, there are detours and digressions—new characters are introduced, new settings, and new moral dilemmas.

Sometimes the connections with the trunk story are clear. At other times, these connections are more tenuous and elusive. And yet

they compel the reader precisely because of their elliptical aspects, and prevent the work from being appraised as merely a religio-didactic treatise.

In addition to these tangential proliferations, another storytelling strategy that Isa has used is polyphony. Much of the prose occurs in the form of dialogues between the protagonist and his foil—dialogues that roam over a broad range of subjects, from philosophy to spirituality to the nature of creativity. However, at times the prose breaks into poetry, and the reader has to enter a different mode of reading.

While these poetic interjections might interrupt the smooth flow of the narrative, they nevertheless represent attempts to reach towards states of epiphany and the sublime. In moving through all these voices—that of the author, those of the characters, shifting between prosaic and lyrical registers, Isa manages to illustrate his protagonist's fractured psychology, while at the same time reminding the reader of the contingent and multifarious nature of reality itself.

I would like to thank the editor, Woo Wei-Ling; the publisher, Edmund Wee and Epigram Books for the opportunity to translate *The Tower* and to share it with a wider reading public.

ALFIAN SA'AT

One

*rustle of rain
on a windowpane
why the chill
of wind in the city
rustle of wind
on the walls of the soul
why is it sealed
the window of love*

EVERYTHING HAS BEEN planned. The ascent will be completed in two days' time. He will climb another one hundred floors today. Another hundred the next day. He does not want to take the lift. The rush of life causes people to drown in the temporary. He wishes to dip into eternity before he leaves.

Once he arrived at the base of the tower, his eyes measured its height. The morning was bright. The tower's peak that was wrapped in steel gleamed with a light that hurt his eyes. That was the peak that chiselled his name into the sky. Its hundred storeys symbolised the year 2000, which would arrive the day after tomorrow, and he was the architect who had sketched and supervised its construction.

He smiled cynically. The reflected rays from the tower's peak speared his heart. Leaving lacerations in his soul. The tower,

regarded by many of the city's denizens as a symbol of the success and prosperity of a society steeped in information technology, cast its long shadow on the ground. His humanity felt dwarfed, haunted by a dim memory. The darkness in his soul was not because of some vague perception of the past, but the result of grey clouds of misery engulfing his inner sky.

Hiiijaaaaaaaz!

Hiiijaaaaaaaz!

The wind's song caressed the hollow of his ear. Faint and teasing. His hair stood on end. The voice faded as soon as it had appeared. He could still hear the small and impish laughter that accompanied its departure. Enchanting and terrifying.

He still remembered that when the competition to design the building that was to usher in the year 2000 was announced, he had received the news with excitement. The competition offered him an opportunity to present a certain philosophy of life that he had been dreaming of. The plot that was offered by the Urban Redevelopment Authority for the project was felt to be most ideal to host a design based on a residential and working concept that he had been practising thus far.

The waterfront atmosphere at the New Downtown Marina Bay evoked a coastal village lifestyle that was harmonious and tranquil. That was the kind of atmosphere that he wanted to conjure. He wanted the year 2000 to begin with life's serenity and a respect for humanity. He really felt that a village environment would be able to conceive and guarantee such a wish.

His belief was not merely due to nostalgia towards a romanticised history. For him, the kampung was a place to live and work that was based on a steadfast and intimate relationship between man and

nature. The village was a true reflection of life in the tropics. The village also presented historical continuity with a past whose majesty and practicality had been proven. The design that would greet the new millennium should be honest and useful towards life, nature and the culture of the equator. As such the concept of a genuine kampung was his choice.

He felt that the city's environment in the present had caused human beings to become more estranged from nature and life. Humans congregated and crept around in a jungle of concrete and steel without realising the true purpose of life.

In the city, human beings celebrated and enjoyed material conditions and comforts, but were caught in the labyrinths and knots of spiritual shallowness and psychological confusion. In the city human beings wrestled with the demands of survival and profit but fled from life's imperatives of honesty and moderation. In the city man was afraid to confront his own face.

man who is free

will not easily become bored

with nurturings and callings

because behind the constancy of the self

there will be born an eternal freedom

what is also named freedom

is not escape without direction

like the children of the city

released from home or work

hither and thither

at shopping malls

seeking exhilaration

*in the novel
and fleeting*

*it is not that this life
does not need
variety
not that this soul
does not hunger for
pleasure*

*only that we who claim ourselves free
are too easily imprisoned
by the vain trivialities
that we kindle
in the middle of the city
without realising that we
have never returned
to the heart's door
even as our feet
have often stepped
at the yard of the house*

As such, initially he refused to design something that would add to the obscurity of the environment in that alien city. He wanted to design something that would offer a remedial difference and stimulate life. He wanted to draw an image that would face and converse with the city's imperious façade. The concept of a village represented his wishes, which would be proposed not through brute force but with gentle persuasion.

Actually, he did not want to directly apply to his design every physical feature of a kampung. To him those were counterfeit and

false gestures. He did not want to create delusions about life in the present.

He realised that a kampung reminded one of dirty latrines, muddy drains, leaky roofs, a plague of mosquitoes, having to take turns to bathe and everything that was uncomfortable. He acknowledged the fact that the kampung was often flooded and was vulnerable to outbreaks of fire. He accepted the fact that the physical kampung had become part of history's remains.

What he wanted to resurrect in his creation was the unspoilt spirit of the kampung. He wanted to interpret and give new life to the concept of a kampung using materials, systems and means that were modern, suitable with the transformations that had occurred over time.

But he knew that his concept would be mocked by friends and foes alike. Maybe they would accept his design because of jealousy or merely to spite him. Each time they would laugh at him when he floated his proposal. They said he was behind the times. Especially since the concept which they thought archaic was going to be applied to a building that was meant to house society and shoulder an economy that was based on knowledge and which symbolised a time to come that was futuristic and modern.

Ever since he had been on campus, he had been regarded as odd and rebellious. He was accused of being different for the sake of being different. He was known by his lecturer and supervisor as an undergraduate who liked to rock the boat, always raising issues and questioning his lecturer's teachings.

Year by year there were always questions he would raise as challenges. He was not deliberately playing with fire but was truly faithful and determined to abide by the principles and concepts that

he held dearly. He had once debated at length with his supervisor during a critique session of his designs. But he stopped himself from behaving rudely. Instead he debated respectfully.

He was an undergraduate who caused all the lecturers, including the faculty head, to convene because the assessment panel was unable to decide how to grade him.

Two out of the three assessors had already slapped him with an *F* whereas another one awarded him with an *A*. The lecturers who had failed him stated that he had deviated from the project brief that was given to him. The project brief instructed the undergraduates to design a primary school or kindergarten but he proposed an educational arena that served as a recreational corner for children.

The assessment panel was shocked when they received no design for a kindergarten or a school in the presentation paper. What was printed was only the sketch of a landscape of a playground in a branching laneway.

He proposed such a design after analysing books on child psychology that revealed how children tend to learn more quickly through play rather than through didactic teaching alone. Furthermore, after he had explored the site where the school or kindergarten was supposed to be designed and built, he found many children who enjoyed playing in the alleys and corners. As a result the idea of developing those methods of play as an educational base for children grew and sprouted in his mind. He was determined to pursue such a discursion and was convinced of the support for his design.

That conviction arose from something that had grown inside him. It was rooted in something extraordinary, which dragged him into the midst of an episode and experience that was wondrous and gripping. He could name it a peculiarity. Or call it a singularity.

He truly believed in that spiritual experience that seemed like a nightmare.

Hiiiiaaaaaaz!

Hiiiiaaaaaaz!

The cackling visited him again. Affectionate and melancholy. He smelt the fragrance of roses, frangipani and pandan. He was stunned for a moment. His spirit drifted in the air. Suddenly he heard the clop of human footsteps and a round of crying from afar.

Sometimes those nightmares would visit him as sudden as a flash of light. They always lasted for a long time, as if to transmit a story. Often he found himself transformed into another person or another state. Sometimes he became an observer to these stories. Always those mental sketches were accompanied by a strange voice that escaped as a cry and sigh from within.

After waking up, the trace and message of the nightmare would stick to his soul like a wind's caress. Or it would glimmer like a reflection of the present or a portent of the future. Whatever its form, he could sieve through and interpret it immediately or after he had contemplated it just for a while. That was the special thing about his mind. That had been his skill all this time.

The inspiration to design that playing corner emerged from the gash of a nightmare that he had had while sleeping for a while during a lecture. He had shivered for a moment. When he awoke, everything was stuck clearly in his memory.

At that moment, the image that was chiselled in his mind was that of a baby crawling while chasing a ball. That baby was himself. Suddenly he stood up and toddled while picking up the ball that had transformed into a book. He examined intently the pictures in the book. He felt warm and happy.

When he awoke, he realised that the warm saliva from his mouth had soaked the page of the book that had pillowed his cheek while he was sleeping blissfully. The trickles from his nightmare had congealed to become the pillar for his design plans. The nightmare had been shaped into reality.

The lecturer who championed his design, defended his courage and the tenacity of his mind in offering a healthy alternative with a design that was challenging and interesting.

But he knew that it was the authenticity of his nightmare that formed the blueprint of his work.

His design became a talking point within his cohort and the academics in his faculty. It became a hot topic because it questioned the educational premises of the faculty. Should an undergraduate be allowed to challenge the foundations of teaching or the syllabus? Or should an undergraduate obey everything that he has been directed and instructed to do by his teacher? He wanted to add: maybe it was time that the study and interpretation of dreams be introduced as a theoretical subject and a part of the creative process.

Actually he had no intention of challenging their pride or causing a commotion. But that was indeed what transpired. A single faculty was torn asunder into two camps after he had displayed his design. When he recalled how the stir was caused by his very own nightmare, he would chuckle to himself.

The psychic gashes from his nightmares over the years had actually become his principles in life. He was convinced that he was burdened by a gift that would stay with him until the end of his life. The nightmares were the throbs of his own heartbeat.

He immersed himself in books about dreams, written by experts on psychology. The lesson he gleaned was that, dreams were mani-

festations of desires that were unfulfilled. There were those who interpreted dreams as the survival response by the psyche that sought to balance out the failures that one experienced through the efforts in one's daily life.

He knew that many people also said that dreams were the games that the devil played. But was it not also true that others had interpreted dreams as the pool where inspiration collected and could be scooped from? Especially if that dream still shone like a clear picture even after its dreamer had woken up. That was what he had been experiencing ever since puberty.

Over the many years he had chosen to be guided by his dream, he had become increasingly convinced that his embrace of it was accurate and true. It was as if a window had opened up into the world of his soul, enthralling him and distinguishing his existence.

Now, at this square, he smiled as he reminisced about the past and the handiwork that stood haughtily in front of his eyes. The tower was the peak of his career. There was nothing more splendid and which satisfied his heart more. It was a satisfaction that weighed heavily inside him.

The tower also had its beginnings in a nightmare. But at that moment he chose to deny it. Yes, to deny it!

The concept of a village that had leaked from a nightmare he had one afternoon at the beach—he hurled into a dustbin! As to why he had acted that way, he himself did not know. Maybe he had wanted to test himself. Maybe he no longer believed in the singularity of his dreams. He was unsure. What was clear was that he was deviating from habit. He was rebelling against his usual nature. He was ignoring the summons from his own soul.

Hiii jaz jaz jaz jaz jaz!

Hiii jaz jaz jaz jaz jaz!

The voice emerged again. This time as an echo that ricocheted off the walls of his soul. His body shuddered. A chill froze his nerves.

Without realising it, that inner mutiny started to flow into his actions and slowly took shape into reality.

For three years he had wrestled with time and himself to prepare the tower. During that time he felt that he had become somebody else. He felt an alienation that slashed at him. But he did not mind. The result was a landmark that had become the pride of the city's inhabitants. He was pleased to have praises and awards heaped upon him because he was the architect who had designed and executed its construction.

And now, at the base of the tower, he could feel those dreams lining up to visit his soul again. This time those dreams all came at once. Drifting in the air and slowly creeping into his memories.

Oddly he felt that the dream was more real than the glass tower that stood in front of him. The dream that was built from the fragments and images of his desires had left a scar in his bosom. A scar that could be touched and caressed.

After seizing him at the base of his heart, the dream sprayed forth from his soul and spun like a series of voices in a whirlwind. Screams were mingled with sighs and turned into wails. Like a banshee in the afternoon. The wind's howl dissipated into a whirring, and then returned to penetrate his ears and to whirl again in his chest. Gathering in force and destroying all defences. As if compelling the resident of the soul to discern meaning from the debris of scattered messages.

He had never experienced such a situation before. This time it was rather different and frightening. The effect was like thunder chasing the edge of lightning. Stacking and piling. Scratching and clawing.

Dazzling and changing its appearance. Expanding and moulding new faces. Like stories that were strange and full of symbols. Stories that beat with their own logic and which defied the laws of the physical world. Stories absurd and fantastical.

Everything appeared again, as if on a film reel. Stories that were without sequence or connection, but which were alive and fresh. Demanding vigilance, immersion, interpretation and meaning-making. Not with the eyes and the mind. But with the sensations and impulses of the soul.

That was what his creativity and life grappled with, tussling and spilling out in search of a form and a face. While experiencing this penetration and turmoil of his soul, he found himself in a state of surrender but also of alertness. Beads of cold sweat dotted his brow.

The dream refuted and expelled the commonsense belief that there was no other existence except that of conscious reality. This assumption might serve other people. But for him, the dream was his soul. Those dreams were himself!

He felt that only by clinging desperately to those dreams, his life was fulfilled. Only by being in the grip of dreams, could his waking life find their balance. He needed the caress of dreams that channeled creativity and breath. This fact he accepted even though he would be exhausted after every encounter with his psychic visitor.

Cold sweat dripped from his brow. This time he really felt the dream's talons digging into him, to the point where his forehead was wrinkling as he tried to withstand the pain. He shuddered. Maybe because of the cold. Maybe because of fear.

The tower that stood erect and pierced the sky now looked like a blinding mirage. His thirsty and tired soul dragged and carried his self-worth, patching it on the surface of the glass. Dryness and cold

were whipped by passing winds in the deserts of his soul. Flying and vanishing in terrains of loss. He felt a loneliness that was sharp and slicing.

The scar in his heart was suddenly slashed. Sore and stinging. The smile on his lips turned into a laugh that scattered in the air and then emerged as a howl. There was something that amused him, which later afflicted his soul. The essence of his character was fractured by lies.

He remembered how the tower—everyone's pride—was actually built on a hilarious pretence. A joke that was based on defying his real nature. He had deliberately done something that was opposed to the message in his dreams. He had broken the rules that he had been holding on to. He had wronged his very own existence!

Finally, that joke now smacked him. He was afflicted by a pride that was bitter, strange and suffocating. There was something that suddenly snapped in him, thrashed by the buzz of the joke and the crush of his admission.

He fell silent for a while. Like a fool. His mouth opened and frothed. He collapsed to his knees as his body could not bear the burden of his soul. His chest hurt. Slowly his eyes crept along the paving in the square and then climbed the 200-storey tower that had become the total and maximum accomplishment of his life. He felt his soul now sink under the crags of the tower.

He lifted his head again. Blinding. He wiped his eyes and adjusted his vision. The shadow of the glass tower suddenly expanded and kept on expanding. He wiped his eyes again. Was this a dream or reality? This time he was unsure because he was feeling terrified.

Trembling, he saw the tower's shadow crumbling. Its peak leaned forward and aimed itself at his heart. Accelerating in his direction.

He panicked and rose to his feet. Beads of sweat dripped from his pale complexion.

He looked around but oddly, not a single human being was at the darkening square. Where were the people who usually crowded the place? He became confused and stood transfixed as if struck by an epiphany. He felt himself on trial. Or sentenced! Alone!

Hiiijaaaaaaaaz!

Hiiijaaaaaaaaz!

He saw the gates that led to the basement of the tower, offering him a way out. Or perhaps it was the entrance to a sealed grave. He was uncertain. His heart was torn. He looked up again. The tower's peak and shadow were now brushing against the tops of casuarina trees that grew around the square. He had no time to waste. He heard a rumbling that was loud and frightening. As if the roof of the sky was collapsing. His soul was pursued by his life's shadow. He felt afraid. Blood rushed to his temples. Something had detached itself from his skull and allowed illumination to enter.

A crow flew in front of him. Its limpid eyes pierced his heart with its gaze.

He ran as fast as he could towards the tower's basement. He looked behind him several times. There was something chasing him. The breathing strains in his chest intensified. He gulped the air with difficulty. Confronted with the mirror of one's self, which human being could run away from the truth?

He screamed as loud as he could! Darkness shrouded the gates of his soul.

Aaaaaak!

From Isa Kamari comes a masterful tale of success and failure, which has been translated for the first time into English by Alfian Sa'at, his debut work of translation. A successful architect visits the new skyscraper he designed. As he climbs the tower with Ilham, his clerk of works, he reflects upon his life and spiritual journey in an increasingly materialistic world. Memories of a dark past plague him as he struggles to reach the top, which are woven into the narrative as a series of fables and elliptical digressions, mirroring his own increasingly fractured state of mind.

ISA KAMARI has written eight novels in Malay, many of which have been translated into English. He has published collections of poems, short stories and plays. He also writes drama serials and documentaries for television. His awards include the S.E.A. Write Award, Singapore's Cultural Medallion and the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang. He has a degree in Architecture from the National University of Singapore, and a Master of Philosophy in Malay Letters from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

ALFIAN SA'AT is the resident playwright of Wild Rice. He is a two-time winner of *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Award for Best Original Script, and a recipient of the Golden Point Award for Poetry and the Young Artist Award for Literature. His works include collections of plays, the poetry collections *One Fierce Hour* and *A History of Amnesia*, and the short story collections *Corridor* and *Malay Sketches*.

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