



MOHAMED
LATIFF
MOHAMED

Winner of the
**CULTURAL
MEDALLION**

a novel

The
Widower

Translated by Alfian Sa'at

Praise for Mohamed Latiff Mohamed:

“[*The Widower*] marks a significant milestone in the development of the contemporary Malay novel.”

— *Dewan Sastera* (Malaysia)

“Latiff’s writings are suffused with universal humanism and a rich lyricism. A powerful writer, he is also one of Singapore’s most distinguished and lauded writers. An outstanding literary talent.”

— National Arts Council, *Cultural Medallion & Young Artist Award 2013*

“He is a writer committed to concrete and moral realism, yet very pronounced in playing with the imageries of satire and symbolism so as to create a literature worthy to be named as emblematic of human conscience against dehumanisation. His commitment to address the community’s spiritual, psychological, historical and moral needs is undisputed. To acknowledge this is the start of recognising a literature to build humanity, and Latiff is surely one of its master builders.”

— Dr Azhar Ibrahim, Lecturer in Malay Studies, National University of Singapore

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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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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife
JAMALIAH,

my sons,
KHAIRIL & HAIKEL,

my daughters-in-law,
NURASHIKEEN & LIANA,

and my granddaughter
BATRISYIA NOOR TASNEEM.

one

Pak Karman visited his wife's grave again that evening, his vigil always lasting from sundown to sunrise. A small yellow tent had been erected over the gravesite, to protect him during his visits. He had planted roses and frangipani next to her headstone, the petals from both plants nearly touching the rusty soil of his wife's grave. During his vigils, he would touch these delicate petals gently, so that they would not drop off, and would also scatter a handful of potpourri consisting of dried jasmine, rose, cananga and orchid flowers onto the soil. He would gaze at her headstone, and sob while reading the Quran. His eyes now focused on a white pigeon that traversed the darkening sky; it vanished behind the clouds, leaving behind a the faint sound of its flapping wings, the speed of its graceful flight reflecting the spray of gentle rain that drifted in the air.

“I think, therefore I am. My fingers that caress these rose and frangipani petals are a result of my thoughts. I feel

content, tender. I feel entranced, ecstatic and besotted by the fragrance of the flowers and this is because of my thoughts. I think, because that is who I am.

“I estimate the distance of the pigeon from the red earth of the grave because I think. I imagine how soft and cool the clouds were, brushing against the pigeon’s wings because of my thoughts. I picture the darkness over my wife’s face in the pit of the grave because my thoughts are what I am.

“Who is capable of destroying the train of one’s thoughts? I once placed the flesh of my thoughts on the surface of my wife’s lips, and once placed the pulse of my thoughts in the crevice of my wife’s thighs, she who is in the grave pit there, in the darkness, black and thick like ink. Sitting on the cold earth above my wife’s body, I now place my thoughts beside her.”

Pak Karman sat directly in the middle of his wife’s grave. His outstretched legs touched his wife’s headstone. He opened his Quran and recited the Yasin verses of the thirty-sixth chapter, which establish the holy book as a divine source. His mellifluous voice, the lilting sound of his prayers, and the utterance of his wife’s name transformed into a mass the size of a clear dewdrop, which entered his wife’s grave pit, then turned into a firefly, its yellow glow illuminating her face. His wife was desolate, he knew. She longed for him, yet she was resigned to her body merging with the soil. To him, there was no difference between lying on top of the grave and lying within it in pitch darkness. Even though he knew

that “I am not just looking at something, but I am aware that I am looking at something,” and even though he had unravelled the meaning of those words many times, he still said repeatedly, “I think, therefore I am.”

He looked up at the sky. This time a pair of white doves, barely visible in the twilight, could be seen kissing while gliding through the air. Half of his wife’s grave was now in darkness. He read his zikir prayers, those litanies to increase his piety—Subhan Allah (God is holy), Alhamdu lillah (All praise to God), Allahu Akbar (God is most great), La ilaha illAllah (There is no god but God). What pierced his nostrils was not any other smell but the scent of the red roses and frangipani at his wife’s grave. “This is the fragrance of my love for you.” Slowly, his lips grazed the surface of her glossy headstone, and he repeatedly whispered the words carved there elegantly in gold-flaked letters, feeling as though he had read the name of his wife millions of times. While performing the dusk prayers with his wife, her glowing face and thin lips would produce a loving smile that was extremely tender; he could still feel her breath on his skin from when she had kissed his hand after their prayers.

The folds of the rose petals then opened up, and his wife’s voice emanated from inside: *My feelings of love flow to cover the light of life, conveying the scent of my love towards you. The light of love for a wife pours towards the walls of time and my soul will not depart from wrapping your soul in affection, even if we were to exist in different realms. My soul*

is your soul.

He stared intently at his wife's gravestone. The smell of freshly scattered potpourri permeated his nostrils, tickling the smell receptors in his brain.

Don't ascribe a purpose to my death. Could this gravestone give meaning to my departure? Could the smell of the potpourri and rose petals give meaning? Could loneliness and longing, like poison that spreads to your veins and pulse, give meaning to my departure for a realm that is different from yours?

His fingers crushed a clod of potpourri in his fist. He placed his forefinger exactly in the middle of his wife's gravestone. He looked up at the sky: more doves flapping their wings. Five black pigeons followed close behind, and then a column of five yellow pigeons. The moon had risen steadily, full and bright, until it was at forty-five degrees inclination from her grave, in a sky the colour of red mixed with violet.

On the night before the accident, his wife had placed her lips on his hand for a long time. He caressed the crown of her head. Then they both repeatedly read the Al-Fatihah, the first chapter of the Quran, praying for God's guidance. Pak Karman could smell the scent of lime from his wife's breath as she leaned against him. They discussed plans to explore and sightsee some of the northern parts of the country. She wanted to visit the largest orchid garden there; her love for orchids was exceptional. The following dawn, on the day of the accident, after the usual as well as the extra optional

prayers had been recited, he stepped outside to pick a stalk of blue orchids from the garden at the back of their house, and he presented it to his wife. She stroked a single orchid at the base of the stalk against her lips and cheeks. He saw the brightness of the orchid reflected in her face, illuminating her graceful features.

They will try to ascribe a purpose to my death, as though it were a punishment, but don't you do so, in order that I continue to live in all the shadows of your longing. I will always be in your sleep and your wakefulness. I will be with you praying, propitiating and yearning for you, in sadness, in sorrow, in dismay and in the most profound happiness. Remember, only let them give meaning to my death. Not you. Remember my words!

Three quarters of his wife's grave was now swallowed by darkness. The sun had sunk half its body below the horizon. But the scent of roses was still fresh, permeating into his heart and his brain. He tried to illuminate the darkness of the lower reaches of his wife's grave by pouring out the light of his love.

Several times he was chided by the wind at the graveyard in a mocking voice, but he did not pay any heed to its taunting: "The one who has left, let her leave; the one who is of flesh should seek out another of flesh; the one who is no longer moving, let her rest in her realm. Don't challenge the will of nature and the ordinance of fate; the one who has gone is gone. Come, seek the ones with flesh to meet with

other ones with flesh as well.”

The rose tried to defend him: “But he has placed love’s loyalty and his everlasting memories on a pedestal; he does not feel that there has been a separation.”

“He has not given any meaning to death,” added the potpourri, also in his defence.

He did not bother with the colloquy of the graveyard. He adjusted his legs and sat cross-legged. He again opened his copy of the Quran. He started reading. His dulcet voice filled the space around the grave. The whole site seemed as though it was savouring the melodiousness of his recitation. The jasmine, the rose, the cananga and the orchids that were scattered over the ground unfurled their petals as they were touched in turn by the lilt of his voice reading verse after verse after verse.

On the night before the accident, his wife told him to look after his health, as she always did; she advised him to continue playing badminton twice a week. Then, six months down the road, he could retire from his job as a college lecturer, and they could both travel the world after visiting the Holy Land for the third time. She wanted him to keep calm and not to always think about the problems that his people faced.

The problems of our people have existed for hundreds of years. You cannot solve them on your own. The problems of our people are like worms that crawl over faeces, there are just too many. Don't bother too much with those problems, rest more,

do more good deeds, do extra prayers. We are in love. I will always be loyal to you until the end of life, until the grave pit, until my migration to another realm.

He continued reading the Quran all night until the dawn, until his voice became hoarse. He swallowed a few drops of dew from the leaves of the rose bush. He resumed reading, but his voice snaked inside his body, crept into his stomach, seeped into his heart, entered his mind, and then settled into his soul like silt on the bottom of a lake, not projecting outwards but staying within his jaw; it was like the waters of a pond, cool and refreshing and bathing the skin of his dreams. With his forefinger, he scraped at the soil of the grave, creating a hole as wide as his fist, and he pushed his left hand into it up to the wrist.

The voice of the red soil at the edge of the grave tried to persuade him: “Go home, find one who moves and whose blood is still flowing. Allow your wife to meet The Silent One. Give her permission to migrate to another realm where she can meet with He Who Loves Her Most. Go home.”

Droplets of rain were now speaking: “Love this pure cannot be separated by nature; there are no two different realms for a love so sacred.”

He picked up a single rose petal that had fallen, put it in his mouth and chewed it slowly. The taste of the rose overpowered his throat. He could not remember how many times he had read the Quran or how many prostrations he had made at his wife’s grave in the weeks and months since

her death. A light drizzle had begun, drifting underneath the yellow tent and moistening his face. The other graves surrounding him appeared as though they were freezing in the morning dew. He looked up at the sky; a cluster of clouds that looked like a light blue shawl was drifting in the morning breeze. He promised his wife that he would try to forget about the problems of his people, that he had actually realised now that these problems were extremely complex, that he completely understood that they were not something he should face by himself. He was very conscious that his people had suffered for hundreds of years, but understood now that there was no use in thinking about this day after day.

The dawn sky darkened, and the fine drizzle turned into heavy droplets of rain. Masses of clouds turned a dark grey and drifted nearer to the mountain peaks nearby. Lightning forked down.

The grass pleaded in the cracks of soil at the edges of his wife's grave: "Go home. There is nothing that you can do here; let the body remain a body. Let the soul remain a soul. Find a partner from the same realm. Go home!" The rain, which was getting even heavier, cascaded onto the shrines and graves around him. He rose to adjust the yellow tent, twisting each corner so that it would not leak rainwater onto him. The smell of potpourri became overpoweringly fragrant.

Could it be that his wife had manifested herself in

this fragrance? Could it be that her love had turned into this heavy downpour? Could it be that his wife's soul had manifested as the sound of the holy verses he had recited? Could it be that she had manifested as one of the white doves that flew joyfully through the reddish sky the previous evening? Could it be that her soul had manifested itself as the sequence of fond and everlasting memories after the prayers he had performed? Could it be that his wife's soul was actually his soul? Could it be that her soul was actually: a shrine, a yearning, a sacred tent, a rose petal, the coolness of the dew that glazed the gravestone, the white cloth that wrapped around the top of the gravestone, the black pigeon in the wing of night, the suffering of a race of people, the torture of longing, the sea of sorrow, the night, the dawn, the dusk, the Al-Fatihah verse, a martyr, a holy war, loneliness, the melody of blood in the valley of sin, the betel leaf for the bride, the scent of a man's body, the scent of a woman's body? Could it be that his wife had not yet migrated to another realm?

The rain abruptly stopped. He looked to his left and to his right: there was no longer a single grave in his vicinity, not a single burial spot. There was only his wife's grave. The rest was desert, sky, a lone frangipani tree. A single cloud above his head. The frangipani tree bore flowers as large as his hand, with thousands of petals each studded with a dewdrop that was both green and red. There was only his wife's grave, a tent of sacred yellow, a roll of verses written

in gold lettering, the letters of the verses growing as large as the branches of the frangipani tree, and he could hear a faraway voice declaiming the words while accompanied by the melancholy strains of a royal orchestra:

a night of far-spreading potpourri fragrance
 forest of holy prayers for love's separation
 lonely and sorrowful the sad morning dew
 if a sea of tears has formed
 if all the verses have been collected
 if all sorrow longing grief mourning have gathered
 if all the tears have pooled
 who cares about this wayfarer's wounds
 if all of the fragrance of love is recalled
 if all of sadness is in mourning
 who cares about the suffering of this man
 if all the fragrances of flowers have gathered
 if all the rosewater has pooled
 at the spiritual well of this tortuous yearning
 who understands this torment
 for all love
 for all passion?
 for you there is no replacement
 let us consummate our spirits
 in the realms filled with fragrance
 cold and forlorn in the grave's darkness
 I am the faithful lover who lights your happiness

The sound of the declaration, the fragrance of potpourri, the desolation and barrenness of the land around him. The sky and clouds were no longer teasing one another. The flowers on the grave bowed their heads mutely.

Then lightning flashed, forking from north to south, and the rain was once again pouring down from the inky morning sky. The yellow tent that sheltered his wife's grave blazed with golden light. The floral scent became even stronger and suffused every corner of the grave. Lightning flashed again like fireworks, illuminating the roses and the flared redness of their petals.

Pak Karman hugged his wife's gravestone tightly. "You left without saying farewell!" The whole of the graveyard was ablaze with light.

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about the author

Mohamed Latiff Mohamed is one of the most prolific writers to come after the first generation of writers in the Singapore Malay literary scene. His many accolades include the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award (1998), the SEA Write award (2002), the Tun Seri Lanang Award, Malay Language Council Singapore, Ministry of Communication, Information and Arts (2003), the National Arts Council Special Recognition Award (2009), the Cultural Medallion (2013), and the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004, 2006 and 2008. His works revolve around the life and struggles of the Malay community in post-independence Singapore, and have been translated into Chinese, English, German and Korean. Epigram Books published the English translation of his novel *Confrontation* in 2013.

about the translator

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*.

"This novel marks a significant milestone in the development of the contemporary Malay novel."
—*Dewan Sastera (Malaysia)*

Former political detainee and professor Pak Karman loses his wife in a car accident. The intensity of his mourning starts to unhinge him.

As reality, memory and fantasy become more and more blurred, he must come to terms with his past actions before his grief overwhelms him completely.

Mohamed Latiff

Mohamed's novel, hailed as a landmark in modernist Malay fiction, is an unsettling tale of psychic disintegration and obsessive love.

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