

Malay Sketches

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Alfian Sa'at
Malay
Sketches

Illustrations by Shahril Nizam

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“The tale of these little lives is told. If I have failed to bring you close to the Malay, so that you could see into his heart, understand something of his life...then the fault is mine.”

– Frank Swettenham, Governor and
Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements.

Also, author of *Malay Sketches*, published in 1895.

For Adriyanti Sa'at

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Foreword

On my last reading of these Malay sketches by Alfian before attempting this foreword, an absurd thought slowly formed in my mind. What if I am called upon to bear witness to the existence of these characters in the pages that follow? That is, to testify if these characters had any basis in reality or if they were mere constructions borne out of an isolated creative writing process. Amusing myself, I began to replace some of the characters' names with real-life names and could see, in these stories, real people – persons I know who had gone through situations and experiences similar to the characters. Some characters could even fit multiple real-life persons.

Here, I want to add that I do not take the term 'witness' lightly. Bearing witness is an act of conscience. I wasn't sure who the judge sitting in my head was supposed to be, to whom I was trying to attest the veracity of these characters and their stories. In the end, I was left with a sense of guilt that I had yet to attempt writing the kind of stories as Alfian has written – sketches, portraits that could expand another person's field of vision or deepen his or her regard for a community.

The circumstances of the 'making' of this volume of *Malay Sketches* deserve mention. Malay writing and

publishing output in Singapore were especially prolific between the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. One of the more interesting details found in the covers of publications from this period was the exact conditions of when and where these writings were produced. Such information was sometimes added posthumously to later editions of these publications. These brief biographical sketches of the writers or publishers provide a reader – even one reading a few decades or a century later – a deeper understanding of the society, the writer's milieu of that moment and a more holistic appreciation of the work.

Back to the 'making': I recall, one night after a meeting, Alfian decided to come back to my place at Perumal Road to hang out and continue our conversations. This evolved into an extended stay, which we jokingly called 'a residency'. This was a reference to the fact that my house, in its previous incarnation, had served as an arts space which had a regular residency programme and which used to host various tenants. Alfian's 'residency' took place over a few months in two halves, broken by a period of him going across the Tebrau Straits. In my mind, this mirrored the changing landscape of the stories in this book.

For this 'residency', he had decided to use a spare bedroom in my house to write. This he did furiously and intensively. My partner (the third person in the house) and I bore witness to a friend at work. In between bouts of furious and intensive writing, there were the kitchen conversations where we would talk about this and that in the course of which we would bounce ideas around. Sometimes I would come out of my room, ranting about a news story I had come across or raving about a nugget of information I had unearthed from my web-crawling (and I do spend a lot of

time excavating the borderless, bottomless Internet). Some of them, I suggested as story ideas to Alfian. Other times, he would blablablahblablah and we would discuss the underlying issues, get into squabbles or similarly sink into quiet reflective moments. Occasionally, we would imagine wildly, coming up with concepts for musicals. After these shared times and exchanges, we would enter separate rooms – back to writing for him and back to reading for me.

From the outset, Alfian had always intended to write the sketches as ultra-short pieces. This meant that after a writing spurt, whatever he produced was almost immediately put up online for his (Facebook) friends to read. This process was repeated: inside room, write, outside room, talk, back to room, write, then online publishing. It wasn't all that regimented, as the regular organisation of hours into day and night was often ignored. Moreover, we sometimes continued conversations when we had returned to our rooms – that is, as online chats that were occasionally punctuated by either or both of us coming out of the room to laugh or exclaim face to face. I was rather amused by all this while observing his other habits, as he probably did mine.

There were times when I felt that maybe this was how it was in the heyday of Malay writing and publishing, albeit not in one's private domicile, rather at an office of sorts. This was an office with friends or like-minded individuals at work, creating different forms of writings to give voice to the community for wider consumption. These days, the spaces and platforms for such writings have diminished somewhat in Singapore. Taking into account the sheer pace of changes that have been taking place in Singapore (and Malaysia too) since the time we first got to know each

other, the urgency for more of such writings to be produced is more acute than that felt by the generation who faced similar yet differently configured pressures arising from rapid urbanisation and modernisation of Singapore in the period of colonial rule leading up to independence.

Stories such as these are important entry points into a conversation that has yet to be held away from the realm of officialdom. Honest, open conversations about issues that are pinning down certain segments of the community whose voices appear already muffled. Alfian does not shy away from setting some of his sketches within complex, intricate circumstances of detention without trial, terminal diseases (an allusion to HIV), class disparity and race relations for instance. Yet he manages somehow to let those voices be heard or raise questions through the characters' interactions, no matter how resigned they are to the absurdity of the circumstances they are caught in, at times desiring justice and at the very least, simply querying but always with an air of dignity.

The reference to the original 1895 volume of *Malay Sketches*, by British Resident-General Frank Swettenham, is purposefully harnessed by Alfian. There is, however, another author who wrote on the same Malay community in that century, a little earlier than Swettenham. In contrast to Swettenham's observations from the outside, the author who is only known as Tuan Simi was writing what his own eyes, as someone from within, had witnessed. In 1831, he protested the fate of the Malays in Singapore under the British via a popular Malay poetry form which is sung (not spoken) termed *syair*. It is not known how widely disseminated the *syair* was.

Sampai hatinya sungguh perintah sekarang
memberi kecewa pada sekaliannya orang
berlainan sekali dahulu sekarang
susahnya bukan lagi sebarang-barang.

From Syair Potong Gaji*

How heartless are today's rulers
who bring despair to everyone
how different it is now from before
the hardships are no longer ordinary ones.

From Syair On A Salary Cut

As much as Tuan Simi tried to capture the anxiety of his times through his verses, so does Alfian through his *Malay Sketches*. And just as Tuan Simi probably understood that some form of collective action was needed to alleviate the situation of his fellow men in his time, so too must we find our best step forward. Reading these sketches is as good a start as any.

Isrizal Mohamed Isa

March 2012

*Muhammad Haji Salleh (ed.), *Syair tantangan Singapura abad kesembilan belas*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1994.

The Convert



Jason wanted the whole works for his wedding. Hawa, his wife-to-be, was actually nervous about having the bersanding ceremony, where bride and groom would sit side by side on a dais. She thought that too much attention would be focused on the fact that he was a Chinese man, dressed in traditional Malay garb.

However, when they were choosing her bridal baju kurung°, Jason had marvelled at the exquisite designs on the songket°. Hawa told him, “The silk is from the Chinese, the gold threads from the Indians, and the craftsmanship is Malay.”

“Do I get to wear it too?” Jason asked, clearly excited.

“Muslim men can’t wear silk. But you can have the cotton songket to wrap around your waist.”

“And do I get to slip in a keris° too? With the handle sticking out at the waist? I’ve seen it in photos.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What for? You want to circumcise yourself under your songket is it?”

For the akad nikah° ceremony, Jason had memorised the words he was to say in one breath, while shaking the hand of his father-in-law. It could have been uttered in English, but Jason wanted to impress his prospective parents-in-law by doing it in Malay.

“I, Jamal Bin Abdullah (his Muslim name), receive the hand of Hawa Bte Iskandar, with a dowry of \$200, in cash.” The kadi, a stern-looking man, made him repeat the line, but this time replacing the word ‘ringgit’ with ‘dolar’. Jason glanced at Hawa, who had taught him the words the night before. She blushed, realising her mistake. Jason sped through his second attempt with ease, and there were smiles all around.

A few months later, Jason was informed by his superior that he was to be transferred to another unit. No explanations were forthcoming. He was told that he could still keep his First Sergeant rank, but that he would now be trained as an Infantry Specialist.

“But I’m a Combat Engineer,” was all Jason could say, blinking at the letter in his hands. His superior sighed, avoiding Jason’s eyes, and said, “It’s a directive from Manpower. But you shouldn’t worry, you’ll still be getting the same pay.”

It was only later that night, lying beside his sleeping wife, that Jason thought of an answer to his superior: “I never went around telling all of you to call me ‘Jamal’. I’m still Jason.” But was he? He turned towards his wife and kissed the back of her neck. She stirred and curled her back to rest in the concavity of his body.

Two years later, in an editing room, a producer was reviewing rushes to be used for a montage for the National Day Celebrations. Ordinary Singaporeans were asked to respond to the question, ‘What will you defend?’ A yuppie-type with black-framed glasses said, ‘My job.’ A scout hesitatingly said, ‘My future.’ A woman at a food court said, ‘Myself’. And then Jason appeared on the monitor. He was wearing his army uniform, with his green infantry

beret. He stared straight into the camera, and in a slow, measured tone, said, ‘I will defend my family. My beautiful wife, and my one-year-old son.’

The producer thought this was the most heartfelt and sincere testimony, and slotted it right at the end of the montage. It helped that one could almost detect tears filling up the soldier’s eyes.