Presentation about Muslim Literature in Southeast Asia

Reaching beyond the Story:

Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches*

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Hikaru Fujii was born in 1980. He is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo. His academic interests are contemporary American and English literature, and he is particularly interested in how the social, economic, and other tensions or conflicts brought about by globalism are described in fiction in the hegemonic language of English.

When he first began his research, he focused on how contemporary white writers in the U.S., such as Richard Powers, Denis Johnson, Steve Erickson, tackle the idea of "America," but later, as he became involved in literary translation, he found out that emerging English-language writers whose first languages are not English are more significant than he had assumed, which has led him to focus more on contemporary immigrant writers. He has often felt that there is a limitation of categorizing those writers as "American," and he is considering whether it might be more useful to think of a model in which the literature of the global English-speaking world is undergoing a reflux with friction to various parts of the world. He is planning future studies based on the idea that Southeast Asia is probably the place where this reflux is observed in an intense and multi-layered manner.

He is the author of *From the Terminal to the Wasteland: Contemporary American Fiction in the Absence of America* (Chuokoron Shinsha, 2016). His translations include Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition* (Hakusuisha, 2017), Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (Shinchosha, 2019), Ling Ma's *Severance* (Hakusuisha, 2021), Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches* (Shoshi Kankanbo, 2021).

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The Watan Research Project is a global study of the relationship between humans and their "Watan/Homeland" from a humanistic perspective. On January 8th, 2022, as part of the project, Hikaru Fujii gave a presentation about Muslim literature in Southeast Asia at the regular meeting of the Research Group of Modern Middle Eastern Literature held at Kyoto University. The following is a transcript of the presentation by Hikaru Fujii.

Reaching beyond the Story: Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches*

Hikaru Fujii

1. English Literature in Southeast Asia

Today I would like to talk about Alfian Sa'at (1977-), a Malay writer from Singapore who writes in both Malay and English. Although he is better known for his works in drama, he has also published collections of poems and short stories, and his prose has especially been acclaimed both inside and outside Singapore. In today's talk featuring Alfian's *Malay Sketches*, a collection of short stories published in 2012, I will discuss how the stories relate to the question of writing in English, the problems Malays face in the history and public policy in Singapore, their relationship with the Chinese majority, the past of the Malay community, and the way Malaysia is described.

In my own research and translations, I often focus on immigrant writers in the United States, but I have become interested in Anglophone writing in Southeast Asia over the past few years since I realized that there is a tradition of literature in English in the region. Although I am still only peeking at the top of it, such countries in Southeast Asia as the Philippines and Malaysia went through the colonial rule by the United States and the United Kingdom, and English was the dominant language during that period, which was then followed by the re-established presence of English as the dominant language of the global economy from the late 20th century. Given these historical backgrounds, I feel that the act of writing in English in the region today is subject to unique tension, including the relationship between domination and subjugation.

Before I get into the stories by Alfian, I would like to share with you such examples of some other authors' work. There is a novel called *We, the Survivors* published in 2019 by a Malaysian author named Tash Aw (歐大旭 1971-). He is of Chinese descent, was born in Taiwan to Malaysian parents and raised in Kuala Lumpur and studied law at Cambridge before he began to write fiction. He has published four novels mainly set in Malaysia, and *We, The Survivors* is his latest work as of 2022. The main character is Ah Hock, who may have the same Chinese name as the governor of Jakarta, who was mentioned in Mr. Nonaka's talk earlier. As for the connection to Indonesia, the narrator of this novel, Ah Hock, also tells that his grandparents lived in Indonesia for about ten years. Ah Hock in Aw's novel is not an influential person or anything, though; he is a son of Chinese immigrants living in a Malaysian village, whose lack of education forces him to go up the social ladder from a very low position. The novel tells the story of how he eventually comes

to commit a murder, which he recounts after he has been released from the prison.

As Aw's novel repeatedly describes, Malaysia imports labor force from Indonesia and other neighboring countries. As the story progresses, it is revealed that these immigrant workers in Malaysia are often forced to work under harsh conditions. Ah Hock narrates the story in the first person, and about halfway through the story, the presence of a person who is listening to and recording his narrative comes into the picture. The listener is a Chinese-Malaysian woman named Tan Su Min, who holds a PhD in sociology from a university in the U.S. and is interviewing Ahok for her new project.

Then, toward the end of the story, Tan Su-min writes a book based on Ah Hock's story and invites him to her book launch party, which he tries to refuse:

> It came from someone I didn't know—someone from her publisher, I later found out, which was throwing a party to mark the publication of the book. Yes, *your* story, she said when she rang me to ask why I hadn't responded to the email.
>
> That's nonsense. It's your book, not mine.
>
> But it's *your* story. You have to come! (323)

In this exchange, it is clear that Ah Hock's experience is appropriated by Tan Su Min, who now belongs to the English-speaking elite after her stay in the United States. Although she insists that it is his story, when the book is published, it becomes part of her prestige as an English speaker. The English-speaking class eventually takes away the fame, while the other classes only provide the material for the fame. There is no equal relationship between the narrator and the listener in this novel from the beginning to the end.

Similarly, it becomes clear in the novel that there is a hierarchy between migrant workers and the majority Malays, but we also find that there are various hierarchies within migrant groups too. Different types of labor are assigned to overseas Chinese, immigrants from Indonesia and immigrant groups from Myanmar, and in this novel, the Rohingya ultimately appear at the bottom of the hierarchy of exploited migrants (as of 2019, when this novel was published, there were about 100,000 Rohingya refugees in Malaysia). It is the elite group who have been educated in English-speaking countries, represented by Tan Su Min, who appear at the top of the hierarchy of labor.

Taking this as a typical example, in English literature from Southeast Asia, the theme of translation often appears in conjunction with the problem of the difference in language between the narrator and the narrated. This is a phenomenon often seen in English novels from the Philippines as well[1].

[1] For example, in the novel *Insurrecto* (2018) by Gina Apostol (1963-), the setting is that an American woman, Chiara, attempts to make a film about the anti-American uprising and the following massacre on the island of Samar during the US-Philippine War, but Magsalin, a Filipina writer and translator who has read the script, resists Chiara's story by making unauthorized changes.

2. English Literature in Singapore and Its Background

Let us focus on English literature in Singapore. When it comes to Singaporean novels in English, the most famous work is probably *Crazy Rich Asians*[2], which has also been made into a film and was also released in Japan, but this time I would like to talk about something completely different.

Once again, I would like to give a brief introduction to Alfian Sa'at. He is a Malay writer in Singapore born in 1977. In his childhood, his mother brought home a typewriter from work and asked Alfian, who was still in elementary school, to write a one-page story, and he wrote 10 pages. In terms of education, he was on an elite path, entering a prestigious school called Raffles Junior College. He had already been interested in drama when he was in middle and high school, and his talent attracted attention even in his teenage years. He then entered the Faculty of Medicine, the National University of Singapore, and continued on the ultra-elite path, but left midway through his studies to concentrate on his creative work.

In 1998, at the age of 21, Alfian made his debut as a poet. He published his first collection of short stories, *Corridor*, in 1999. This collection has also been translated into Japanese under the title *Sayang, Singapore* (translated by Miyuki Kousetsu). He is one of the few Malay writers who write in both Malay and English, and he is also quite active in Malaysia, having published a number of theatrical works in Malay.

One of Alfian's stories about the education he received is that his mother led him to speak only English at school. Therefore, he says that he thinks in English and dreams in English. On the other hand, most of the time he communicates with his family in Malay, and he expresses that Malay is "much more a visceral language." He also says that Malay "comes out when I am subconsciously under stress and in pain" (Sa'at, "Nationalism").

Because he belongs to minorities in multiple aspects (he is also an active voice of the LGBT community in Singapore), Alfian has experienced various forms of conflict in Singapore, where oppression of minorities exists both implicitly and explicitly, including the termination of government subsidy. In 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the country, he presented a five-hour-long play titled *Hotel* in order to describe another centennial history of Singapore and to give voice to the people who have been excluded from the official history of the nation. He is currently a playwright with the Singaporean theater company W!LD RICE and visited Japan in 2016 at the invitation of the Japan Foundation.

I would like to share something with you regarding the English literature in Singapore based on Alfian's remarks. An English theater writer, Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002),

[2] A 2018 film produced in the United States directed by John M. Chu. It is a romantic comedy about a young Chinese-American woman and a man from Singapore.

who was a pioneer in Singaporean theater, was detained by the authorities from 1976 to 1980 on the basis of Singapore's notorious Internal Security Act. As exemplified by this, Alfian says that the Singaporean theater in English has had a very strong political implication from its early days.

On the other hand, there has also been a tradition of poetry writing in English since the 1930s. A typical example is Edwin Thumboo (1933-), who was also a professor at the National University of Singapore. Alfian therefore points out that English poetry is a genre opened up by poets from the university teaching class, and because of this, poetry in Singapore tends to be less political and more adaptable to the ruling class, since it is ultimately stuck inside the Establishment (Sa'at, "An Interview"). Indeed, considering that Thumboo's career has been described as "a transformation into a 'poet laureate' who annotates and propagates the great myths of Singapore's development" (Kousetsu 285), Alfian's recognition of the lack of political implication in Singaporean English poetry may be based on this perception as well.

The background of this evaluation of genres and writers is the fact that the People's Action Party (PAP)[3] has never been out of power in Singapore, and has always been an overwhelming majority in parliament, which has resulted in strict control and management of speech and expression. Therefore, the significance of each writer and his/her work is to some extent measured by the distance from the government's ideal image of Singapore and public discourse.

For example, perhaps the most internationally acclaimed literary work to come from Singapore in the 21st century is not a novel or a book of poetry, but a graphic novel called *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. It is a book by Sonny Liew, born in 1974, and is a work that explores the dark side of the People's Action Party's public discourse. It is a unique graphic novel that traces the life of an artist named Charlie Chan Hock Chye by including sketches he drew as a boy, cartoons that imitated Osamu Tezuka, and underground posters that criticized the government in his later years. The main character, Hock Chye, does not exist; he is a character created by Sonny Liew, and all of his works, from the Osamu Tezuka style to his later works, are fictional. Through describing the life of the fictional cartoonist, the graphic novel attempts to portray what has been sacrificed as a result of the development of Singapore and whose voices have been oppressed.

When you turn the cover of this book, you see two faces inside: one is Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of the country, and the other is Lim Chin Siong, one of the founders of the People's Action Party and one of its early influential figures, who was later detained for being considered a communist and forced to stay away from political life, and eventually became mentally ill. The two are depicted side by side, each making his own

[3] A political party in Singapore, founded in 1954 by Lee Kuan Yew as a political party based in the Singapore region of British Malaya. Singapore gained independence from Malaysia in 1965 and, as the ruling party, it has grown the country into a major economic power under a development dictatorship.

claim. We can see from this layout that this work delivers counter discourse to the official view of the national history. As a result, a grant from the Singapore Endowment, which had been decided to be given for the production of the work, was terminated. However, it was published to international acclaim, and in 2017 it won the Eisner Award, one of the prestigious awards for graphic novels.

This distance between authority and literature can also be seen in the issue of race. Singapore has adopted multiracialism as a national principle since its independence in 1965. In the early 1960s, on the premise of its annexation to Malaysia, it enacted a constitution that designated Malay as its national language and provided free primary education to Malays. Finally, however, in 1965, the country in a sense got kicked out of Malaysia and became independent. The Malay language has remained as the national language, but it is only symbolic.

The four officially adopted categories of ethnicity are Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others. This classification of ethnic groups in Singapore "is not based on the intrinsic feelings based on the commonality of ethnicity, religion, language, etc., but rather, it was constructed during the colonial period and was taken over by the post-independence state, then has been given social substance supported by the policy of multiracialism, essentialized and fixed, and rooted in the consciousness of the people, and is considered to be continuously constructed further" (Ichioka 67). In short, it is pointed out that the artificially constructed category has become substantial and institutionalized.

In fact, ethnic Chinese comprise 75% of the population in Singapore, while Malays account for about 15%. About 520,000 people belong to the Malay category, and it is said that the majority of "Malays" can be grouped together by the common denominators of being Muslim and using the Malay language. However, a closer look at the actual demographics of those who are considered "Malays" reveals that they come from different regions and about 350,000 of them have their roots in the Malay Peninsula or Sumatra, 90,000 in Java, 60,000 in Bawean, and less than 20,000 in Bugis, Minangkabau, and others. In addition, there are a few hundred of the Toba Batak, who are Christians, although they belong to the Malay category of Indonesian origin (Ichioka 92-93).

However, the public discourse of multiracialism in Singapore does not cover that much diversity but tends to homogenize it within the category of Malays. For example, while English is used in public education in Singapore, there is an additional subject called Mother Tongue, in which students are required to learn the native language of the ethnic group they belong to. Malay and Chinese are naturally offered, but the actual mother tongue of each student is often different from the officially designated mother tongue, and when there is a discrepancy between the language in the subject and the students' actual mother tongue, the subject is prioritized (Ichioka 54). Therefore, it is pointed out that integration into the officially defined native language is required, and in this way assimilation pressure is added within the group. As a result, it is also pointed out that

“homogenized and ‘safe’ images of ethnic groups and their cultures are shown at culture shows as the essence of multicultural Singapore” (Kousetsu 278).

Considering this background of homogenization of public discourse, it seems that there is a certain political nature in using English, the dominant language of literature, and in depicting people who stray from the social norms offered by the People’s Action Party. In fact, it is said that “intercultural” characteristics have developed in English-language theater in Singapore, and among its strategies, as exemplified by Kuo Bao Kun, is “breaching of ethnic myths and stereotypes, which are summoned only to be subverted” (Seet 306). It may be this tradition that Alfian characterizes as political nature of theater.

Another often noted result of the multiracial policy of Singapore is the isolation of each racial group from each other, in addition to the stereotyping of each racial group. The government is wary of the deterioration of racial friction and repeatedly states that discussion about ethnic groups is highly sensitive. Indeed, people have been warned or even prosecuted for making offensive comments about other ethnic groups on the Internet. As a result, it is pointed out that “people do not step in deeply enough to substantially experience cultural exchange or mutual understanding, and they even avoid interacting” (Ichioka 76).

We can see a lot of high-rise condominiums in Singapore as a typical sight, which were built under the initiative of the Housing & Development Board (HDB). In order to avoid the separation of ethnic communities, different ethnic groups are mixed deliberately to live together in those developments. This is supposed to create a harmonious society, but in reality, it is said that in the housing that was meant to use the corridor as a common space where neighbors would inevitably interact, the corridor in front of each house is just a solitary space that is used by each house as their private space (White 7).

Alfian points out that the languages of Singaporean literature are also divided into Chinese, Tamil, Malay, and English, and that there is little interaction among them. This also explains why he describes the current state of Singaporean literature as “four solitudes” (“An Interview”). He says that writers who write in Tamil only expect Tamil readers, and those who write in Malay for Malay readers do not expect to be read across the ethnic boundaries.

3. Creation as Translation

Alfian's point is that writing in each language in Singapore should not remain isolated from others. He chose to write in English because of the hope that creation in each language should not be confined to its own solitude and that he desires to be involved in creation that serves as a “translation,” both linguistically and culturally. Considering the Singaporean demographics, it can be said that he is addressing a younger generation of

readers to a certain extent. The 2016 census shows that 54% of people under the age of 20 use English (Wada 152), and the language most used at home was Mandarin in 2010, when about one-third of the population was using Mandarin, but in 2020, it was publicly announced that the percentage of Mandarin usage had shrunk, and English was in first place (Lin). Therefore, English is the natural choice for the language that facilitates mutual understanding.

Alfian is not the only writer who tries to create works as "translation." There is a Chinese-Singaporean writer named Jeremy Tiang, who was born in the same year as Alfian, who also writes in English and actively translates Chinese writers into English. We can expect to see more and more of this kind of writing-as-translation across multiple languages.

However, questions will still arise. If it is a good thing for a work to be written in English from the beginning or to be translated into English from Tamil or Malay, and to be placed on a common platform, the question is how much of the specificity of each culture and language will be preserved. In Singaporean literature, the question has also been raised, "Is it really a 'success' to take a work written in Tamil or Malay to a major publisher in London or New York and see it being translated and distributed with a cover that will appeal to Western readers?" (Wada 161).

Alfian also made a remark concerning the issue and refuted those who pointed out the untranslatability. "I don't think there are aspects of Malay culture that are resistant to 'translation' for outsiders. And quite frankly I think the moment one thinks that there is something unique and intransigent about one's culture is when one might begin to exaggerate, even commodify, its potential exoticism for the outsider's gaze" ("An Interview"). Considering the homogenization and stereotyping of ethnic groups that have emerged from Singaporean multiracialism, and the way these stereotyped images are advertised to the outside world, I believe that Alfian's statement reveals not only that there is something universal about the human experience, but also a sense of urgency that insisting on the uniqueness of one's own culture may lead to an affirmation of the official discourse of "Malay-ness."

4. Another *Malay Sketches*

Given this background, Alfian's title of his short story collection, *Malay Sketches*, itself shows his awareness of the political nature of his work. This is because there is another book titled *Malay Sketches*. In 1895, Frank Swettenham, who was the governor of the then British Malaya (of which Singapore was a part), published a book titled *Malay Sketches*. It is a very old book, but it is available online at the archives of the University of Michigan.

I checked out what he wrote in that original *Malay Sketches*. It is a book written in English, of course, with the aim of delivering the "true picture" of the Malay people. It is stated that the reason why the Governor General himself wrote the book is to "describe the Malay as he is who will disappear or conform to the views of a stronger will and a higher intelligence" after Western civilization, or more precisely the British had entered their world. It was under such a "benevolent" vision of the rulers that Swettenham wrote *Malay Sketches*.

The problem is that what is presented here as "The Real Malay" is still carried over into the 21st century as the stereotype of the Malay in Singapore. For example, the first chapter of Swettenham's *Malay Sketches*, titled 'The Real Malay', presents the temperament of the Malay male as follows:

> He is courageous and trustworthy in the discharge of an undertaking; but he is extravagant, fond of borrowing money, and very slow in repaying it. . . . He is, however, lazy to a degree, is without method or order of any kind, knows no regularity even in the hours of his meals, and considers time as of no importance. (Swettenham 2-3)

Decades later, these stereotypes would bind the view of Malays in Singapore. In the 1960s, Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, presented an image of the Malays who value an easy and enjoyable life as opposed to the Chinese, who place more importance on economic success (Ichioka 140), thus clearly dividing the two groups. Thus, Lee Kuan Yew's logic was that it was reasonable to create a Chinese-centered society for the prosperity of the nation. It is easy to imagine that this logic is directly connected to cultural determinism or cultural deficit theory. It is often brought up in the 21st century to explain the low social status of Malays in Singapore (Ichioka 141).

Then there is the issue of language. English, the dominant language during the colonial period, has again become the dominant language in post-independence Singapore. Although English is seen as the most neutral language, I think it is inevitable that it will be used as the official language of the state and become a political entity in its own right.

5. Alfian's *Malay Sketches*

It is against this background that Alfian Sa'at decided to write *Malay Sketches*, a portrait of the Malays in English, in the 21st century. Therefore, I believe that the problem of "translation" involved in *Malay Sketches* goes beyond simply introducing the Malay people to other peoples. If the universality of the Malay experience is emphasized, there is a danger that the various problems faced by the Malays in Singapore society, including

discrimination, will be buried as common struggles also experienced by the majority and other minority groups. This is a problem that arises from emphasizing too much on universality. On the other hand, when it is argued that a Malay has a unique experience because of the ethnicity, it becomes indistinguishable from the essentialism of Malayness as a stereotype that the government touts.

Therefore, I think it is important to find out what kind of Malay people Alfian portrays in his *Malay Sketches*. His awareness of these problems supposedly led him to make some settings in his work. In order to avoid portraying a monolithic image of Malay, Alfian has included as much diversity as possible in his book, and to avoid falling into essentialism about what Malay society is and who Malay people are, he has included many characters on the border who come into contact with other ethnic groups. So, while the question "What is Singapore?" emerges from many of the stories, the work is designed in such a way that there is no assertion of the essence of the Malay people. I will discuss this later.

As the book is labeled "Sketches," it is a collection of 48 very short stories. Rather than having a storyline or a clear sense of opening or closure, he writes in a style that begins and ends with a scene with a limited number of characters, similar to a theater stage, giving the narrative framework that focuses on a single moment.

Another characteristic of the book is that Alfian, who is from a theater background, puts a lot of information into the casual conversations and gestures of characters. Each story has this characteristic and a series of even shorter scenes are inserted throughout the book, such as a young man holding a pre-dawn prayer at 5 a.m. in Paya Lebar, a teacher supervising her class working on composition at 8 a.m. in Telok Blangah, and a man running for a cigarette break at 12 p.m. in Tanjong Pagar. The whole work is framed, consequently, by the hours from 5:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m., which depict the different daily experiences of Malays.

5-1. Language and "Malayness": "The Barbershop" and "Foreign Language"

I would like to introduce a few specific short stories. The idea of "translation" is the starting point for the entire book, and we will look at a few stories that seem to express it well.

In the short story titled "The Barbershop," a young Malay man serving in the army gets his hair cut by another soldier, also a Malay, and recalls his own childhood visits to a barbershop in the Malay district.

However, the story goes on to show that this is not a good memory for him at all. When he sat down at the barbershop, he was asked in Malay what kind of haircut he wanted. However, the protagonist himself is not a Malay speaker, but an English speaker

who learned Malay later, so the boy lacked confidence in subtle verb inflections, etc., and panicked when he was unsure if he could answer correctly. He got excellent grades in his "mother tongue" subject in elementary school, but when it came to actually using the language, he got impatient and ended up telling his request in English. The barber then gave him a very cold shoulder and said, "You don't know how to speak Malay, is it?" (100). After that, the boy waited awkwardly in silence for the haircut to be over.

The protagonist who has grown up enough to serve in the military talks about these memories as follows:

> I spoke first in Malay, and then unconsciously switched to English. It didn't matter. I was being understood. And I thought of that barber from Bugs Bunny, who oppressed a twelve-year-old and initiated a cycle of self-recrimination, with his disgust at my inadequate grasp of the language. Living in Singapore for so long, and having served customers of many races, was it even possible that he could not have comprehended my English? I thought of all the purists who appoint themselves as the linguistic police, who insist on rigid notions of cultural authenticity. (101-102)

The barber's attitude is that Malay is the language spoken by the Malays, which excludes English speakers from them. In this way, the barber is flaunting his Malayness, as if Malayness resides in language, which in the end seems only oppressive to the protagonist or an uncritical following of the official multiracialist scheme of "true Malayness."

About 10 years later, the short story ends with the protagonist getting a haircut by a fellow soldier to see how well it turned out. "A humble pair of paper scissors. My hesitant Malay, my over-mannered English. As I admired my hair in the mirror later on, I thought: never judge the handwork from the tools" (102). This means that in addition to the fact that the haircut was done with a makeshift pair of stationery scissors, the words used to describe the memory are also awkward. It is clear that "the tools" in "judge the handwork from the tools" refers to the matter of language. In other words, which language is used does not determine whether the outcome is good or bad. In the story, the protagonist expresses his intention that being an English speaker should not determine whether he is disqualified or recognized as a Malay, and if we step out of the story and think about it, I think it is also a criticism from the author against the essentialism that writing in English cannot properly represent the Malays and that the Malays can only be properly represented in Malay.

There is another short story about language titled "Foreign Language." It is about an unmarried Malay woman named Maisarah who is having a hard time finding the right man and is worried that no one will understand her feelings. She is attracted to a man

named Jacques, who is from Quebec and now lives in Singapore, and has recently converted to Islam. When she goes to dinner with him and talks to him about her worries, he says, "It's not so hard for me to understand what jodoh is, for example. There's nothing alien about it. Love that is destined. Le destin nous a réunis" (112).

According to the explanation offered in the story, "jodoh" is a Malay word that refers to "one's intended in life" (110). Maisarah thinks that she is in a situation peculiar to the Malay culture, but Jacques tells her that the same notion exists in French, and in fact, it can be easily "translated" to other cultures and languages. Thus the possibility of Maisarah emerging out of her isolation is shown, and I think it is also a possibility of escaping from cultural isolation. In this way, the idea that it does not matter what language you speak, whether it is Malay, English, or French, is also an idea that languages are equivalent and that exchange is possible between them.

5-2. Identity and Perspective: "The Convert" and "Losing Touch"

In doing so, as I pointed out earlier, there is a danger that the problems faced by the Malays in Singapore will be easily universalized as being the same in all cultures, which would deny their uniqueness. The author is probably aware of this risk, which can be seen in the first story in the book, "The Convert." It is literally the story of a man who has experienced a conversion. The main character is a Chinese man, Jason, who converted to Islam when he married a Malay woman, Hawa, and received the Muslim name Jamal Bin Abdullah.

At the beginning, there is a lively exchange between the two lovers about what outfit to wear at their wedding. The bride decides to wear an outfit called a baju kurung, and Jason himself is excited to see what he can wear. He asks if he too can wear something silky and glamorous, and when Hawa tells him he can wear a songket, he asks if he can wear a dagger called keris. He just acts as if he's playing dress-up. Thus the difference between them is clear: Jason, one of the majority who can't give up the feeling of cosplay during the trip, thinking that he can dress up in an outfit he has never experienced before at a wedding, and Hawa, the minority who easily sees through the superficiality of his intentions.

A few months later, Jason, who has his Muslim name, is transferred to another section of the military where he works. Although his rank and salary remain the same, his title changes and he is virtually demoted. Naturally, Jason wonders if he was demoted because he has converted and become a Muslim, renouncing his Chinese status.

In fact, there was a time when Malays were exempted from military service in Singapore because Malaysia and Indonesia were imagined enemies in terms of national

defense. This exclusion was abolished in the 1980s, but from then, it has been pointed out from time to time that there has been discrimination in military service that is not visible. As an example, there are an unusually small number of Malay pilots and an unusually small number of Malay officers who are promoted to senior officers (Ichioka 157-158). In addition, military service is compulsory for all adult males for two years, but not all of them join the military, and there are other courses of service such as the police force. It is said that there is some discrimination, with a much lower percentage of Malays going to the military, and an unnaturally high number serving in the police force.

In "The Convert," the change in treatment in the military after his marriage depicts Jason as a character who has crossed the border from the majority (Chinese) to the minority (Malay). His experience as Malay was cosmetic at first, but for Jason, it turns into something that undermines his dignity, as he is denied his place in society and continues to receive the message that he is a second-class citizen. Behind it all, of course, dimly emerges the Malays who have been in this situation all their lives, unlike Jason who began to experience it midway through his life.

From there, the story quickly jumps two years forward to the final scene. It is a depiction of the pre-edited footage which is seen by a producer who is editing the footage for the celebration on National Day. In the footage, ordinary Singaporeans are stopped on a street corner and asked the question, "What will you defend?" (2). A variety of answers are presented: a yuppie-looking man with black-rimmed glasses answers "My job," a janitor answers "My future?" while a woman in a food court answers "Myself" (2); and then, Jason appears.

> And then Jason appeared on the monitor. He was wearing his army uniform, with his green infantry beret. He started 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.' (2-3)

The story ends with the producer thinking that he could use Jason, with his eyes seeming to be filled with tears as he answers, and deciding to include Jason at the end of the video.

The question is that what is the cause of his tears when he said he would "defend my family." If they are tears shed as Jason, it may be a kind of loss, that he has lost the social status he originally had because of his marriage and conversion, but cannot turn back. Or, if they are tears shed as Jamal Bin Abdullah, it may be a determination that family is all that matters to him, regardless of his social status, or a protest against Singaporean society's refusal to give Malays any other source of support than family. There are many possibilities, but Alfian has chosen a sketch-like style, so while he offers these multiple possibilities for interpretation, the story never settles on any one of them. This principle of not offering the

final answers is followed in other stories as well. So after all, it is up to the reader to decide and understand what is hidden in the fluctuation of one person's identity.

The Malay community's relationship with the outside world is again depicted in the following story, "Losing Touch." The protagonist of this story is a female student at the National University of Singapore, who was selected as one of the Malay Muslim students who performed particularly well and was to shake hands with the President at an awards ceremony and receive a certificate. The President of Singapore is also the President of the National University of Singapore as an honorary position, so it can be seen as a token of her achievement. However, when it came to shaking hands with the President, she panicked, snatched the certificate without shaking hands with him, and walked away from the stage.

> Of course, the protocol was that I should shake his hand. But I was wearing my baju kurung, and a tudung. The President is a man, and I'm not supposed to have any physical contact with the opposite sex. That's a kind of protocol too. (5)
> tudung: A headscarf worn by Muslim women (author's footnotes)

This is the protagonist's description of the scene. The President is holding out his hand, but is ignored by the protagonist, and his hand is frozen in mid-air. Hence, the title of this piece is "Losing Touch."

However, the family does not understand the protagonist's argument regarding the custom. The parents say that it would be a problem for the entire Malay community. The mother says she "shamed the whole community" and the father lectures her, "When you do something like that, it's so easy for them to call us extremists" (5). In this situation, to defend one's membership in the Malay-Muslim culture and to avoid physical contact with the opposite sex is to express one's unwillingness to integrate into the "mainstream society" of Singapore. As mentioned earlier in Ms. Nonaka's presentation, women wearing tudungs and dressed as Muslim women is a trend that has become quite prominent in Singapore since around the 21st century.

The 2001 arrests in Singapore from 2001 to 2002 for allegedly planning terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalist organizations is one of the factors in the father's remark about "extremists," and the student is faced with the critical gaze toward Muslims which has become very strong. The student, also blamed by her family, writes a letter to the President explaining that she did not mean anything symbolic and that she does not want to advocate for the separation of the Malay. The final scene takes place as she finishes the letter and heads to the mailbox to drop it off:

> When I reached the post box later that day, I found myself confronted by two different slots: 'Singapore' and 'Other Countries'. It made me pause for a while.

> My sister had asked who I was. What kind of country did I see myself living in? What kind of country did I want for myself? I wasn't different for the sake of being different. And being different is not the same as being difficult. (6)

She is faced with a choice between two slots to put her letter in; the following passage concludes the story:

> I rested the envelope on the lip of the slot that said 'Singapore'. I'll describe the scene for you. There is a girl standing in front of a post box. She is wearing a baju kurung and a tudung. An envelope has just dropped, like a leaf, from her fingers. But she is still standing, her hand frozen in mid-air. (7)

This is a very theatrical gesture of pausing that makes an impressive ending. The scene at the beginning of the story, where the president holds out one hand only to be ignored by her, is just paired with this last scene, where the protagonist's hand is still frozen in midair as she places the envelope in one of the mail slots.

I like this scene very much, and I recently came across a passage from a very different context but still summarizes what the girl here experiences. In an essay on Ainu literature, it is explained that an Ainu person "is made another while staying in the place of her/his birth" (Sato-Rosveag 210). This aptly describes this Malay student portrayed by Alfian. There are two different destinations, "Singapore" and "the rest of the world," to which the protagonist has to choose to send a letter explaining her position, and there she ponders for a while. Even though it is obvious that she should send the letter to "Singapore," the fact that the protagonist is troubled by this situation indicates that the question of to whom the letter should be addressed is of great significance.

From the description in the story, the president to whom the letter is addressed is probably Sellapan Ramanathan, a Tamil who served as the 6th president from 1999-2011. Combined with the fact that she is writing to a person of Tamil descent, it is assumed that she probably writes her letter in English. The composition of a Malay writing about her position in English would inevitably apply to the author of the book, who writes *Malay Sketches* in English.

If the student's letter is seen as a symbol of the book as a whole, the scene in which the protagonist is unsure whether to send the letter to "Singapore" or to "Other Countries" also takes on another meaning. If the letter is to be sent to "Other Countries," then it involves the implication of appealing the Malay people's position or plight abroad through English writing. This would probably reinforce the image of Malays as a minority who do not want to be integrated into "mainstream society" in Singapore. If the letter is sent to the "Singapore" mailbox, it will match the author's attitude of seeking mutual understanding by using the common language of English, while it is not certain if the letter will be received.

Considering the situation that the protagonist is not able to move after posting the letter, and the overlap with the scene at the beginning of the film where she escaped shaking hands with the President, we have no answer as to whether the act of shaking hands with each other, in other words, mutual understanding, will be established or whether they will miss each other again.

Following "The Convert," Alfian chose to close this work with an open ending. Setting the endings in such a way that makes a certain statement would subjugate the characters, but in the case of this work by Alfian, I think his main focus is to carefully depict the complexities surrounding the characters who find themselves in a certain situation.

Various Malays appear in the following stories, bringing to light the challenges confronting the Malay community. Among them, there are the problem of drug addiction, of being in a lagging position in the educational society compared to the Chinese, the problem of the high percentage of single mothers, and the problem of employment discrimination against women who wear tudungs. All of these could lead to the accusation of the majority in Singapore, but Alfian's narrative is reserved with respect to such judgments and claims. I believe that *Malay Sketches* consistently takes the stance of looking tenderly at people struggling to find a place they belong in such situations.

5-3. Relationship with Huajin: "His Birthday Present"

One topic that can fall into a very simplistic perspective is the issue of educational gaps. In Singapore as a whole, the percentage of university graduates was 22.8% in 2010. And the percentage of Malays with a university degree was 5.1%, which is far lower compared to other ethnic groups. The Chinese and Tamils are close to 30%, with the Tamils slightly higher.

In Singapore, there is a standardized examination in the final year of elementary school that determines whether a child will continue on to higher education or to a vocational school. In preparation for this test, parents invest desperately in their children's education. This investment begins even before children enter kindergarten, and it is even said that whether a child is put in a kindergarten which provides cramming determines the starting line. Therefore, once a child is socially and economically marginalized, it is difficult to seize the opportunity to emerge out of it.

This situation is clearly depicted in the short story, "His Birthday Present," which centers on a single mother, Nur Jannah, and her expectations for her son Shafiq, who is in early elementary school, and from the very first sentence, the story exudes an expectation of academic achievement.

> Nur Jannah always told her son, Shafiq, to make friends with the Chinese boys. She said, "if you have Malay friends, you'll always be talking. You won't know what the teacher is saying." She believed that Shafiq would pick up some of the habits of the Chinese by mixing around with them. For her, this meant a competitive spirit and a natural aptitude in Maths. (105)

In this passage, the mother tells her son how important it is to adapt to a situation in which the Chinese have an advantage in academics, but when she thinks that the Chinese are born with a natural aptitude for arithmetic, her idea falls into typical cultural essentialism, and it is clear that Nur Jannah thinks too simply. To her, being Chinese means being privileged by birth, but the author Alfian also points out that Chinese are not uniform and that there is a history of hardship in Singapore for Chinese-speaking Chinese. Singapore used to have Nanyang University, which offered courses taught in Chinese, but it was forced to close in 1980 and merged into the National University of Singapore. Before it was gone, it had been the largest school in Southeast Asia that offered degrees in Chinese, and Alfian notes that the sense of frustration among non-English-speaking Chinese in Singapore was quite profound with regard to its disappearance (Sa'at, "An Interview"). In other words, the author clearly recognizes that the Chinese are not naturally superior or anything like that, and Nur Jannah's view in the story is deliberately made simple in order to reveal its narrowness.

Nur Jannah is brave enough to attend the birthday party of one of Shafiq's classmates, but when she gets there, she finds that they live in a bungalow. In Singapore, the majority of the population live in apartment complexes, so the fact that they live in a detached bungalow house shows a considerable disparity. When Shafiq's classmate opened the birthday present from his friends, he found a lot of luxurious things like PlayStation, but what Shafiq brought was a water gun, so Nur Jannah had to leave early because she didn't want her son to see it.

After returning home, Shafiq says that he too would like to have a water gun like the one he gave to his classmate, but Nur Jannah tells her son that he can't do that:

> She wanted to tell him that her way of showing love for her child was not through buying toys. It had to do with the pity in her breast when she watched him leave for school each morning, walking down the lonely corridor, shifting his shoulders from side to side so that the weight of his box-like backpack could be centralized. She remembered one day when he turned around, unexpectedly, to smile at her, and how she had to force her hand to clench a goodbye wave. It was a hand that was going to cover her mouth, to stifle a sob; she had felt at that moment that she did not deserve to have Shafiq in her life.
> But all she could say was, "Because you're my son." (107)

From Nur Jannah's point of view, the unbridgeable gap between them and the Chinese is so big that it appears to be innate. This makes her son's future seem fragile, which is why she feels "pity" for him. If the story then continues to accuse social inequality, it follows such a simple development of the story. However, Alfian's writing focuses less on the accusation and more on the mother's feeling that her son would have a better future if only he had not been born a Malay. The story in this way indirectly conveys the harshness of the social reality that makes parents feel this way.

It would not be surprising if the structure of the conflict between the Chinese as the majority and the Malays as the minority is revealed, but there is also a short story titled "A Howling," in which an elderly Malay man and a blind Chinese man suddenly begin to interact with each other and a friendship between the old neighbors is rebuilt, the image of the Chinese as uniformly socially superior is corrected. There is also a love story titled "Singapore by Night," in which the Malay male protagonist, a music lover, lists his favorite popular singers of the past: Saloma is a Malay, Kartina Dahari is a Javanese, Lafair Buang is a Bawean, and Sharifa Aini is an Arab (143). The theme of music is also used to cleverly convey the fact that within the simple racial categorization of Muslims in Singapore as Malays, there are actually diverse groups.

5-4. What is Malaysia?: "Playback" and "Two Brothers"

In this way, questions of identity and the relationship between majorities and minorities are depicted, and the question of what home/land really means would arise. The question asked by the student from "Losing Touch" is a typical example of the question of "What kind of country is Singapore, the country we live in?" Then the relationship with Malaysia would be inevitable. Singapore was part of Malaysia for several years before gaining independence in 1965. Since Malays are the majority in Malaysia, some of the Malay intellectuals in Singapore left Singapore and migrated to Malaysia after independence. Although there are immigration checks to cross the border to Malaysia, there is a bridge across the Straits of Johor and the fact that Malays are the majority in a neighboring country that is a short drive away means that some Malays who were pessimistic about their future in Singapore is naturally attracted to Malaysia in search of better opportunities.

The story "Playback," which is set against the backdrop of such migrants to Malaysia, features an aspiring actor who gave up and left Singapore several years ago. The father remains in Singapore, and the story starts with the scene where the father turns on the karaoke machine at home to see his son appearing in a cheesy karaoke video. The middle part of the story is taken up by the quarrel between the son and the father.

When his son Khairi tries to make it as an actor in Singapore, his father tells him, "Know your place." When he adds, "This stupid dream of yours, you can't go anywhere with it. Not in Singapore." The son simply says, "Then maybe Singapore is not my place" (161), and leaves for Kuala Lumpur.

> After an absence of two years, he had returned, back to the living room, in a karaoke video. Was this what his son had meant by there being more opportunities for him across the causeway? So as to end up moving ghost-like across the screen, as much of a backdrop as the jetty, the wooden railings, the lethargic waves lapping the shore? An empty image, to accompany other people's rendition of another artist's song? (161)

"The causeway" is a road over the Straits of Johor, and eventually, the son has not been able to find his place as he had hoped either in Singapore or Malaysia. He had left Singapore in disappointment because he could only live as a backdrop to a world dominated by the Chinese, but in Malaysia, he is still a shadow of someone else, lip-synching to a song in a karaoke video. In other words, the son in this story remains unable to have a voice of his own.

And it is even ironic that the song itself was written by one of the few Singaporean singers to have succeeded in Malaysia. The father at the end of the story begins to sing to the image of his son, who has abandoned his homeland to dream of a similar success only to wander around as if he were a ghost, unable to reach anywhere. The story depicts the multiple layers of failure in gaining a voice.

There is another short story called "Two Brothers," also related to the entertainment industry. The older brother has moved to Malaysia and to succeed, while the younger brother remains in Singapore. Although they are brothers, they are twins born 10 minutes apart, so they appear as mirror-image of each other. The younger brother remains in Singapore and works as a cameraman for documentaries. The older brother moved to Malaysia early on and got a permanent residence more than 10 years later, and is on a career path of becoming a paymaster at a Malaysian TV station. He is so successful there that he feels good about it and tells both his brother and parents in Singapore to move to Malaysia as soon as possible. But the younger brother is not so easily persuaded. The older brother says, "There's no future for us in Singapore," to which the younger brother replies, "Helmy, our past is in Singapore." "What past are you talking about? Look at what happened to the Malay Settlement in Eunos. To the Istana Kampung Glam. To Bidadari." the elder brother presses on, to which the younger brother responds, "So if we all leave, then who's going to stay behind?" (166).

Here, the older brother Helmy mentions three places: the Malay Settlement in Eunos, Istana Kampung Glam, and Bidadari, all of which are deeply rooted in the history of the

Malays in Singapore. Istana Kampung Glam was a palace, and Bidadari was a traditional Malay cemetery, but both were demolished or had their land seized in the course of urban development. So it represents the fact that they have been shown that they are the marginalized in the society.

When the older brother suggests that they should leave their past behind in order to seek future opportunities, the younger brother responds that he cannot throw away his ties to the past. The two men stop discussing again, as they have always done, so there is still no resolution in the story, and the contrast is clear between the older brother who has abandoned Singapore and the younger brother who cannot abandon the city. However, when the older brother says that it is to abandon the past and seek future opportunities that is the right thing to do, the younger brother's remark, "Maybe you're much more Singaporean than you think" (166), cannot be overlooked. This is a criticism that the older brother's abandonment of Singapore to seek future opportunities is also evidence of Singaporean values, a society of meritocracy that prioritizes self-interest. In other words, it raises the question of how much the home/land of Singapore has become a part of their selves, and whether it is something that can be easily abandoned. Alfian's style is to layer the subject of how far one can be separated from the past.

6. *Malay Sketches* as a Work of Fiction

I have introduced some social themes that appear rather plainly in several of the story in *Malay Sketches*, but I would like to add a final point about its characteristics as a literary work. The careful portrayal of the characters is at the heart of Alfian's stories, which in itself is an excellent literary practice, but another point of interest is that the theme of death and ghosts appears repeatedly throughout the book.

At the beginning of my presentation, I talked a little about the context of English literature in Singapore, and among the preceding generation of English writers is a Chinese writer, Catherine Lim (1942-). *Or Else, the Lightning God & Other Stories*, a collection of short stories published in 1980, has been translated into Japanese as *Singapourian Singapore* (translated by Miyuki Kousetsu). The stories often feature marginalized people in society, which includes transgender issues. As an English writer from a generation earlier, her stories are relatively close to those of Alfian in terms of theme, making them a good comparison. Death is notably a common theme in Lim's short stories too. The collection begins with the short story "Father and Son," which is about a Chinese businessman whose father, with high hopes that his son will take over the family business, allows the son to steadily build up his education, but as the son grows up, he becomes aware that he is a transgender person, and the father comes to know about it. The father, unable to accept this in terms of his values, decides to break off relations with his son and publishes an ad

in the newspaper saying that his son will no longer be recognized as his son. For the father, the ad is his son's obituary.

Another short story titled "Unseeing," features a woman who originally wanted to become a monk ends up marrying a man by chance, but is unable to have children and left behind by her husband. However, the husband does not close his eyes after his death, and the funeral begins with his eyes wide open, leaving the woman to wonder what kind of regrets he might have. Then a somewhat dark-skinned woman shows up at the funeral with her children and tells them to say goodbye to their father. And when the dead man's mistress and illegitimate children say goodbye, the deceased closes his eyes in satisfaction.

There is also a story about a girl who is enslaved in a Chinese family, becomes pregnant, has an abortion, and dies, becoming a ghost that haunts the perpetrator. Death thus plays an important role in Lim's short stories, and the way she writes about it indicates that "death" is first and foremost an incident in her stories and a device to move the human drama along.

On the other hand, Alfian Sa'at also repeatedly introduces the subject of death in *Malay Sketches.* For example, there is the story of a woman who discovers that she has breast cancer when she has an X-ray; the image shows that she has calcification, which reminds her of the story of the specter Hantu Tetek, who chokes children to death with her large breasts. Or another story tells of a Malay father who has lost his son in execution and receives his son's ID card. There is already a small hole in the ID card, which tells him that his son is dead.

Thus, the theme of death seems to haunt *Malay Sketches*, but in Alfian's stories, it is often accompanied by subjects such as absence and loss, so that death depicted in *Malay Sketches* leads to the question of what it means for a person to lose his or her place in the world. It may seem a bit simplistic to summarize it this way, but I believe that the Malay experience of social dislocation runs along the subject of death and that the two are in close proximity, if not necessarily equal.

Perhaps that is why several Malay folktales of ghosts and specters have been revived in the book. They are all ghosts and goblins who are supposed to be dead but wandering around the world without a place to belong. Or, when the protagonist is sarcastically criticized by a Malay barber in "The Barbershop" mentioned earlier, he compares his reflection in the mirror to a ghost (101). The stories are often accompanied by the theme of death in such a way that the characters' lives are tinged with a sense of fantasy as if it were overlapping with the world of the dead, which is also a characteristic of this collection of short stories as a whole.

Closing out the collection of short stories is a sketch called "Kaki Bukit, 3AM," about a young boy who sees a buffalo giving birth in his dream, and when he wakes up, he realizes that his dream was about a story his mother had told him about her memory of the past when she was taken to her grandparents in Malaysia:

> Sitting in the dark of the living room, he realized how his existence did not begin only when he was born. He had always existed, in some form, before his time, in his mother's childhood. As she, in turn, would also exist, after her own time, her memories indistinguishable from his dreams. (184)

Simply put, it is just that an old story his mother told him that reappears in his dream, but the boy wonders where the boundary between his own life and his mother's life lies, and the story ends with the boy seeing a world where the line between life and death is blurred. The question of where the boundary between past and present, or between "life" and "death" lies for a person, gives *Malay Sketches* as a certain depth as a literary work. In the end, when the memory of the mother emerges in the boy's dream, it becomes unclear whether the memory of the buffalo's birth is carried by the mother or the son, and if we expand it to the whole story, we may ask who is to carry this *Malay Sketches* stories written in English. Thank you very much.

(Translated by the author)

Qs and As

Oka Thank you for your presentation. I appreciate the opportunity to learn more about Singapore.

I was reminded of one of my students at Kyoto University, who studied in Brunei. She had studied Arabic before going to Brunei because she was interested in Islam. She wanted to study abroad in a country where Muslims practice their Islamic faith, but since Kyoto University's only exchange partner universities in the Middle East are Tel Aviv University (Israel) and Istanbul University (Turkey), so eventually, she decided to study in Brunei. Her diploma thesis was about minorities in Brunei. Brunei is quite the opposite of Singapore. Muslims are the majority, and Chinese are the minority. She specifically focused in her thesis on the Chinese stateless population in Brunei.

That's when I saw a map of Brunei for the first time and recognized where the country of Brunei lay. Malaysia is right next to it. And in that region, where Malays and other Muslims are the majority, there is Singapore. Is it like Israel in the Middle East, isn't it? I wonder why Singapore was expelled from Malaysia two years after its independence.

Fujii They had been discussing integration and once they were integrated. However, Malaysia wanted to pursue a policy based on the premise that Malays (Bumiputra) should be the majority, and Lee Kuan Yew's position that Singapore's Chinese population was 70-80% of the total at the time and that this would not work out well could not be reconciled. Singapore was then notified by Malaysia to "leave if that is the case."

Oka Then, it is still about Watan/Homeland: Singapore as the Watan, can it be the Watan for the Malays? What does Watan mean to the Malays.....?

In Tash Aw's novel *We, the Suvivors*, which you introduced at the beginning of your lecture, a character who speaks fluent English uses the stories of those who don't speak English for personal benefit and appropriates their narratives. This reminded me of the Arabic novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El-Saadawy, an Egyptian feminist writer, who passed away last March at the age of 89. The novel is her masterpiece, and one of its themes is the dispossession of marginalized voices, the so-called "subalterns," by those in power who have the voice to speak.

The doctor, a specialist in psychoanalysis, interviews a woman on death row about her experiences as part of her own personal agenda to further her own career, and although she is initially rejected by the inmate, the doctor eventually gains access to her cell. The majority of the novel comprises the condemned prisoner's first-person narrative. The work deliberately depicts the gap between those who have the voice to speak and those voiceless who have no other choice but to be told by others, and the exploitation inherent in this gap.

When reading Arab women writers' works, It is clear that they are well aware of this divide. In Japanese women's writing, however, there does not seem to be a similar awareness of this issue. A big discrepancy between the written Arabic and its colloquial variants might be why Arab women writers are aware of it.

Also, the theme of ghosts you mentioned in the last section brought to mind a short story collection called *The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales* by the Syrian woman author, Ghada al-Samman, which is a collection of stories that all revolve around ghosts. Its opening story, *The Metallic Crocodile*, whose narrator is a Lebanese immigrant living in Paris, uses the metaphor of Ghosts to emphasize the presence of immigrants who are invisible to the French. In short, they are there, but they are invisible to the French. Similarly, in the film *Bread and Roses,* directed by the British filmmaker Ken Loach, a young Mexican girl was smuggled into the United States to work in Los Angeles. She cleans the floors of an office building while the American office workers walk over her head as if she does not exist. I remember a line in the film that goes something like, "They can't see us, we are invisible."

The Malays in Singapore are at home. They are not immigrants, although they are perceived as outsiders in their homeland. This is similar to the Palestinians in Israel, who live in their own Watan or homeland, but it is made to be the homeland of the Jews.

Fujii Thank you. I thought that the fact that the language is different makes it easier to acknowledge deprivation very clearly. An example that I myself noticed is a graphic novel called *Munnu: A Boy From Kashimir* by Malik Sajad. It is an autobiographical novel about a boy born and raised in the Muslim part of Kashmir. It is a graphic novel, but the people of Kashmir are portrayed as deer, the symbolic animal of the region. The ruling Indian

soldiers appear as human, and there are many scenes in which they hunt deer. Sajad himself writes as a Kashmiri, but he also writes to explore the fact that the story is written in English and he's not a "pure" representation of the Kashmiri experience. In the last part of the book, an EU envoy comes and talks to him but ends in disagreement, and the selfishness of the way he is accepted in the English-speaking world is emphasized, but Sajad himself is asked to contribute to the British "Guardian" and "New York Times" and is treated as an "authentic" local reporter, a twisted composition that I thought has continued throughout the book.

The ghost stories reminded me that when I read English literature from Southeast Asia, there are so many stories about ghosts. In a short story by a Filipina writer Mia Alvar, the ghost of a woman who was killed by the Japanese army appears, and when a Vietnamese writer Violet Kupersmith describes boat people, a grandmother tells a story about how she was saved by a ghost when her boat capsized. I have a feeling that writing Southeast Asian history in English somehow tends to induce ghost stories. Though it is only a tentative hypothesis, I suspect that English writers have in common the sense that there is always some memory floating around that cannot be fully depicted in English but is always there.

Oka Given the abundance of ghost stories in Southeast Asia, *881: The Papaya Sisters* came to mind. It is Singapore's smash hit movie in 2007, which features the Huajin sisters, who, as a musical duo known as "the Papaya Sisters," compete with the "Durian Sisters" in the singing competition held in the month of August during the *Bon* festival honoring the spirits of the departed. We also have a culture of *Bon* here in Japan, in which the living entertains the returning spirits of the deceased. We share a common culture with the Chinese in Singapore. Our ghosts in the Buddhist culture may be different from the ghosts of the Malay people since they are Muslims.

Nonaka Thank you very much. It was very interesting. As Prof. Oka mentioned, I think Singapore's special position in the Malay world is very important, where Muslims are the majority. That is why the Singaporean state's policy of control and assimilation of Muslims and Malays has been so thorough.

Historically, of course, Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaysia for only two years, from 1963 to 1965, and even before that, it was an integral part of Malaysia as a British territory. In the 19th century, Melaka, Penang, and Singapore were incorporated into British territory before the rest of the region as Straits colonies, where there used to be the Kingdom of Melaka and the Kingdom of Johor in the pre-modern era. Originally, there was no border, but they were divided in 1965 when Lee Kuan Yew declared independence. Considering this history, I thought that we should also look at the Singaporean government's policy of control and inclusion of the Malays.

This story may have conveyed a good image of the Malays to the majority Chinese

because it was written in English. It may be ironic, but what Alfian Sa'at tried to do may actually have been relatively acceptable to mainstream Singaporeans. It has also been argued that the story was so well acclaimed because it was written in English. If it had been written in Malay, it might not have been praised so highly. Maybe Alfian, as one of the "Malays" in Singapore, is seen as a person who is well-included in the society from the viewpoint of the Singaporean mainstream.

I enjoyed all of the works, but I particularly liked *Losing Touch*. The depiction of women wearing hijab and not shaking hands with men can be seen in the work of Feby Indirani, whom I mentioned earlier. I believe it is only in the last 30 years or so in Indonesia that the tendency for women who wear the hijab to avoid shaking hands with men has arisen. The situation is probably similar in Malaysia. Historically, women usually shook hands with men in Malay world, but since the 1980s, as many Muslims became more aware of Islamic teachings, the discourse that Islamically it is better for men and women not to touch each other directly came to be accepted and practiced by many people. In Indonesia, many women, when asked to shake hands with men, have begun to pose as if to say, "I'm sorry, I will not shake hands with you even if you ask me to do so." When women who wear hijab first began to appear, they were sometimes criticized because these practices were said to be due to their devotion to extremism. The women who began wearing the hijab strongly insisted, "This is not political at all; we are doing this out of our faith in Islam." This is often written in Indonesian short stories. I think Alfian may have also depicted this kind of historical situation. So in the story here, the father says, "By not shaking hands, all Malays would be treated as extremists," and the mother says, "You have shamed all of us." The generation gap is a very important factor. It was young, educated women in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia who started wearing hijab and tudung prior to other generations.

I also thought that the story of the ghost was probably connected to the animistic beliefs that exist in the Malay world, that is, the idea that God resides in various parts of the everyday world. In Malay and Indonesian, they are called "jin" and believed as goblins on a different level from Allah. To appease them, Indonesians believe in a power that is a mixture of animism and Islam, and people with that kind of power are thought to be dependable from others. Perhaps in Singapore and Malaysia, ghosts are a familiar existence in the animistic beliefs as well.

Fujii Thank you very much. As I was studying and translating, I came to understand what each of the behavior roughly means in Singapore, but I had no idea what works or writers represent the situation in the Malay world including Malaysia and Indonesia, so I am very thankful to you for providing me with the regional context.

I also found it interesting to read about folk tales that seem to be widely told in the Malay world, such as the stories of Hantu Tetek and Pontianak, which I did not understand,

but which seem to be rather well-known ghosts and spirits, and how they are arranged to fit in with the current situation in Singapore. Alfian Sa'at was originally a medical student, and in one story, a woman who identifies with a ghost who was unable to die peacefully is interviewed by a trainee of a doctor and he regards her story as usable material for his novel. "Usable" here implies that it would be popular with readers and society, but I also think that the author uses these settings as a kind of mirror to look at himself who writes about others.

Oka I want to ask you, Prof. Nonaka. Are goblins, ghosts, and ghostly spirits common across ethnic communities in Southeast Asia?

Nonaka I believe it is. Not only does it transcend ethnic barriers, but it also transcends religious barriers, and Christians believe in the same kind of ghosts and goblins, which in Indonesian is called "Hantu". The person who appeases them is generally called a shaman, or in Malay, a dukun. The dukun is often a person with Islamic powers, and such a person would come and say spells to quell ghosts and goblins, or touch people who have become possessed by goblins and were fainting or acting strangely, to cure them and let the goblins out of their body. Such things can still be seen in many places. Therefore, it can be said that it is a belief, practice, and phenomenon which goes beyond ethnic and religious boundaries.

Oka That's interesting. It reminded me of *Tantal*, an Arabic short story by Samir Naqqash, a Jewish-Arab writer of Iraqi origin. Tantal is a specter that, in Iraq, both Muslims and Jews believe in. Interestingly, Muslims and Jews, regardless the religion, believe in the same ghosts, and I feel that this may have something to do with the issue of Watan/Homeland.

Kuno I thought they were all really great short stories. As I was thinking about the stories about ghosts you two mentioned, I think there is a kind of revival of repressed things, like in gothic literature, though it may be so analogical, where things like ghosts and apparitions appear in places where there has been colonial experience. I imagine that there may be a little bit of that involved, but is it correct to take it as such?

Then I think Singaporean Malay writer has written stories mainly in the aspect of depicting Malays in relation to the Chinese, but is there any work of his where Indian people or the relationship with them is thematized?

Also, is there an English literary magazine in Singapore as a medium for presenting work? Or, since it is in English, would the entry point for writers be a large literary magazine in the UK or some other country, or would it be through an Internet-based format, like the Indonesian writer I mentioned earlier? I am interested in the stage of becoming a writer, and what kind of steps needed to become a great writer.

Fujii Yes. I thought about how to offer something through those 500 hours, and my answer was to make a film. It was a difficult task to watch the footage over and over again and assemble a narrative for t Starting from the publication platform, literature shows that there was a movement in the 1930s and 1940s to establish Malay and Chinese (Mandarin) magazines for the respective language groups, and each language had its own representative literary magazine. However, I have not been able to find any information that these magazines are still active, and I have a feeling that the trend of submitting to literary magazines and sharing with the community may be disappearing, but I do not have any further information.

In the case of this collection of short stories by Alfian Sa'at, it was first published in 2012 by Ethos Books in Singapore with illustrations. It was then published in 2018 with the same content, but a text-only version without illustrations was published. The publisher of the later edition is based in New York, Singapore Unbound, which aims to distribute the voice of Singapore to the American side and other countries. Even if writers cannot find a place to publish their works in Singapore because of the oppression, they can publish their works through this New York-based publishing house. The first book it published was *Malay Sketches*.

As for the depictions of relationships with the Indians, there are surprisingly few, and judging solely from that, I have to think that the Malay position is still mainly related to the Chinese. In a story about a prison guard, the Malay protagonist is told that he would be given the position of an executioner, and it is mentioned that the person who is offering to give it up is apparently of Indian descent named Mr. Singh. I could not find a story that goes further than that, that shows all of the relationships with the Indian descent.

As for ghosts, I think you are probably right about the return of the oppressed. I had the opportunity to translate Filipino literature from English, in which the memories of the violence annulled by colonialism have almost been revealed, and it is argued whether such memories should be disclosed by depicting ghosts. Although it does not depict the ghosts themselves, there is a depiction of a bridge that was shot in the Philippines for a movie about the Vietnam War, and the bridge shown there was actually blown up by the Japanese during World War II, which is like a palimpsest, like a memory of another timeline that is somehow right in front of you. But it is just an old bridge over a river if you do not know that fact. In that sense, I think that each of the stories has something similarly repressed and it suddenly appears in the expression.

Kuno Thank you very much.

Oka Thank you very much, Prof. Fujii, and thank you, everyone.

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Muslim Literature in Southeast Asia

Reaching beyond the Story: Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches*

by

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