



Alfian Sa'at
Malay
Sketches

Illustrations by Shahril Nizam

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Malay Sketches is a collection of stories that borrows its name from a book of anecdotes by colonial governor Frank Swettenham, describing Malay life on the Peninsula. In Alfian Sa'at's hands, these sketches are reimagined as flash fictions that record the lives of members of the Malay community in Singapore. With precise and incisive prose, *Malay Sketches* offers the reader profound insights into the realities of life as an ethnic minority.

Malay Sketches Details

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Author : Alfian Sa'at

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From Reader Review Malay Sketches for online ebook

Rosa says

Definitely a must read. And re-read. One of my favourite singaporean book.

There are people who say that an image is more worthy than 1000 words, but for this book of Alfian Sa'at, each of the words could be 1000 images, feelings, smells, hopes and dreams.

The prose is natural and direct with a pinch of poetry to give a good overview of the malay people from all different society stratus in modern Singapore.

Dave says

Moving, poignant and funny, Alfian's study of Malay culture in Singapore is an amazing collection of vignettes. Tackling a diverse set of issues such as the death penalty and political detention are tales of love and redemption. Highly recommended.

Ray Ong says

The archetypal Malay is deconstructed and demystified to the reader (ostensibly an Other - one of the remaining three official "races" that make up Singapore's CMIO racial model). I found myself empathizing with the anxieties that plague the Malay minority here; preconceived stereotypes, covert (sometimes overt) racism, the paradoxical essence of Malayness, to name but a few. Through this I have gained a newfound respect and deeper understanding of the Malay community in Singapore.

Zafirah Ab Rahim says

Every turn of the page feels like you're discovering a golden nugget. The stories were written in a simple but poignant way, as though they came from our own memories and onto the pages of the book. Each story touches on a different aspect of what it is like to be Malay. It doesn't discount the changes that Malays have undergone in terms of personal identity as well as a race in general. Some stories will cause you to be self-reflective. Others will allow you discover aspects of the Malay culture that you may have taken for granted or may have never known at all. This is a book I'll definitely recommend to anyone and everyone who wants to know what it's like to be Malay.

Harajyuku says

Perhaps it is flash fiction's essential abruptness, as well as the elegance of his writing, that allows his stories to feel so authentic - shards that suggest the shape of the vase, pieces that hint at the perfection of the whole. How ham-fisted so much identity fiction seems in comparison. And yet his endings are often just as obvious, a little morality-play-ish. Yet his focus on the day-to-day, apolitical, unspoken, unrewarding, ultimately

performative aspects of identity... is undeniably refreshing.

Kyc says

This is a good collection of short stories. The title already proudly announces itself as a collection of sketches (mostly vignettes or short sketches) delivered from the perspective of an ethnic minority.

First, the plaudits. The prose is concise, to the point and subtle enough not to be sledgehammering. Obviously Afian Sa'at wrote most of these stories with social or political points to make. The fact he can wrap his political/social points in an intriguing story already makes this collection quite distinctive within the canon of Singaporean English literature.

These stories are written from the point of view of Malay minorities who are aware of their marginalized (at times oppressed) status. There really isn't enough space here to judge whether such a perspective is true enough, and obviously they are *not* "politically correct", although I will touch on these issues later--all one needs to know to enjoy them is that Alfian Sa'at pack a punch at the end of most vignettes. Most are rather short stories, no more than three or four pages long. From a technical point of view, these stories are excellent and ingenious.

That said, I wonder if some stories do not suffer from what may be called a "reverse racism". Take one story "Shallow Focus" for example. It states how Malays are often stereotyped by others, including themselves, within the nation-state, but also perpetuates certain stereotypes of the Chinese as well (Chinese Singaporeans are said to be interested in money, job-hunting and like taking family photographs in studios. "Only Chinese people do this kind of thing," was the protagonist's answer when asked by her Malay mum to take studio family photographs.) In "A Howling", Chinese employers are insensitive enough to ask an Indonesian Muslim maid to wash their dog; the gentle irony is that the maid isn't treated like a fondly remembered dead son or even an animal.

Even more subversive is the story "Two Brothers", portraying Singaporeans as materialistic and progressively Mandarin-speaking (!), referring to an enigmatic "incident on the bus". (Alfian clearly knows what incident he is referring to, although I don't.) The conclusion of one brother is this: "When it comes down to it, it's all about race... There is no future for us in Singapore." The younger brother is a Malay documentary maker who isn't promoted and barely earns enough, whereas his brother in Kuala Lumpur is getting favored jobs. This stance is reiterated in "A Starry Hill" (KL portrayed as a place where Malay Singaporeans are jolted back into reality) and "Playback" (Malaysia seen as a dreamland where a Malay Singaporean singer finds solace and nurture. "Know your place... this stupid dream of yours, you can't go anywhere in it, not in Singapore," his father barks.)

Political subversion is another obvious theme in the collection, which is really to be expected from this generation of more dissident Singapore writers. Controversial local issues concerning the Malays, from the tundung, the death penalty, AIDS, evicting Malay villagers off Pulau Ubin (though giving them a small flat in return), the marginalization of Malays in the armed forces etc. are given wide coverage. Needless to say, the government is always portrayed in a very negative light, as if they are some sort of heartless agency. Whether this is true or not, only Singaporeans can decide.

In short, if you are uncomfortable about political subversion (a die-hard supporter of PAP?), didacticism, taking an anti-government stance etc., then you may not like this collection much.

One point to note: I hope that stereotypes become less common in contemporary Singaporean writing, whether in describing Mainland Chinese ("They're creating an environment where you lose out if you don't speak it... they are importing monolingual speakers to put pressure on us") or Malays.

Ororo Lazuli says

Alfian Saat captures vividly the maladies affecting the Malay people in Singapore. Bringing back the popular Malay myths such as Pontianak and Hantu Tetek, he rewrites these popular tales into everyday vignettes. Alfian humanizes these living legends! I love them! His re-imagination of these tales struck a chord in me. He weaves common perceptions of the Malays and portrays the reality of racial tension that have always been swept aside by the government. He reveals the dark underbelly of this tiny island within the Malay Archipelago, where its native people are no longer the majority, and have to struggle to survive that tide of change. He does it in a way that does not reflect utter bitterness or a sense of victimization that posits the Malay as the marginalized. Instead, he does it with so much integrity and wit that it showcases the complexity, the culture within and the tendencies of the Malay people that has its own pros and cons and should be celebrated nonetheless. I laughed, I smirked and I felt. Alfian Saat brings back the Singapore that I have lost. That is bittersweet.

Tse Guang says

Malay Sketches begins with a story told from the perspective of a Chinese convert to Islam. For me, it was a clear sign of Alfian's project - a representation of a culture to the outsider, who is encouraged to put aside any ideological baggage he may have and see things from 'the other side'. That this project both has its roots in and reacts against a certain cultural essentialism is clear enough; what truly surprised me was how this theoretical Other reader changed as the stories progressed.

In 'The Barbershop', for example, the familiar postcolonial trope of two tongues is retrod; 'am I not also Malay?' is the question the boy seems to be asking at every instance. The outsider to this interiority is the Malay who believes that the Malay language, perhaps even the Islamic faith, is a measure of Malay-ness. The very form of flash fiction prevents any sort of attachment to a single point of view, and I think this points less to the diversity of 'Malay culture' (whatever this might mean) and more to the fact that a single consciousness - Alfian's? - is able to express itself through multiple facets while at the very same time maintaining a stable core. The culture that is represented here is not unproblematically Malay as it is Malay-ness changing and being changed.

Of course, I have some misgivings about this collection. The style of writing is often compositional and didactic, too often telling rather than showing. In this case I ascribe the root of the problem less to the writer's ability and more to an implicit politics that pervades the work. Every '(Malay Ghost) Story' becomes an increasingly formulaic deconstruction of folk belief - clearly a form of realism is being pushed across to the reader. 'Times are changing, so Malays must change too', these might-as-well-be-real stories seem to say. That strikes me as certainly a legitimate, but not adequate reason for cultural adaptation. Secondly, and surprisingly, Issues of sexuality are elided in favour of the perennial contestation of 'race-language-religion'.

All in all, a worthwhile read, and clearly a landmark work, but it seems to be written with an eye firmly on the Singaporean canon. Thus Alfian's style, which after some thought I have decided to call narrative

paternalism, often prefers to guide its reader to the point being made, in a way utilizing a strategy of the state. To be sure, the contents of the sketches are progressive, but their style remains staid. The changing face of the Malay is still being drawn with traditional techniques. It bespeaks the uneasy balance between nostalgia and modernization that plagues the Singaporean psyche.

Christine says

3.5-4

Ana says

To read Alfian's Malay Sketches (or any of his writing for theatre, print, or online) is to gaze unflinchingly at the blemished truths we hide from the stories we tell our friends - the intimate moments with our families: the awkward, the uncomfortable, the shameful and the ones that are full of love. These are the stories we all know, these are the days we have lived and narrated in our heads for only our hearts to hear - uncensored and woven with a poetry only Alfian is capable of.

This is the best of Singaporean literature - a read I would recommend and make compulsory in schools if I had my way.

Lulu Rahman says

Words used are simple yet they stir up such provoking thoughts.

Are the Singaporean Malays just a bunch of lazy people leading a hedonistic lifestyle? No, we are a pretty diverse group. Are we too laid-back? In a fast-paced society like ours, that's actually a plus point. Are we too stupid? Definitely not! But sometimes, we're made to believe that. Will the Malays ever move up the ranks of this supposedly egalitarian state? HAHA! Maybe, if we allow ourselves to believe that there is true meritocracy.

And does this book answers all the above questions? Yes, though the answers are at times implied rather than blatant, left open for the readers to interpret in their own way. Will I recommend this book to other Malays? I don't need to since they'll pick it up anyway. However, I strongly suspect they're not exactly the target audience.

Prasatt says

Malay Sketches is that rare book in Singapore that offers a true glimpse into the experience of Singaporean Malays. Having grown up in a neighbourhood with many Malays, many of the experiences within feel familiar - getting my hair cut whilst seated on a plank placed across the barber's chair, playing football at the void deck and coming back with dirty feet, being terrified of the Hantu Kumkum; these were all these that I too had experienced. But to say that this then gives me full and complete knowledge of the experience of my

Malay neighbours and friends living in Singapore is to commit an act of narrative violence. Perhaps, we are meant to question our assumptions and claim to know what's best for our fellow people.

That said, this series of sketches can sometimes feel hit or miss, but what it does do is give you a multi-faceted view of the seemingly odd commingling of alienation, love and identity that is a defining feature of the minority experience in Singapore.

Priscilla King says

These flash fiction stories seem to be the right length for me. Each one is a plausible sketch of what might be a real, and usually likable, person. "Sketch" implies a short, quick creation that may be developed into a longer piece, and these "Sketches" left me interested in the longer story that grew out of one of them in *One*.

All the central characters are "doubly minoritized" people of Malay descent in (or from) Singapore--not oppressed by legal discrimination, but conscious of being an ethnic and religious minority. Some of the stories are about moral issues facing devout Muslims at work and school. The content is adult, and some of the stories are grim (one character has an abortion; another has died with symptoms that suggest AIDS), but presented in a tasteful Singaporean way. Most of the characters are nice people in nice, normal situations. Sometimes they're conscious that their niceness is a privilege others lack, as when a happy family camping trip with a sing-along on the beach ends with the family realizing that some of the singers-along are homeless people.

On the whole I'd say these stories are "mature" enough to interest any adult or teenaged reader.

Jason Lundberg says

A beautifully-written collection, providing a unique insight into Singapore's Malay culture, which has thus far been under-represented in English-language Singaporean writing. I'm a big fan of flash fiction; it's an exceedingly difficult art form, where an entire narrative must be distilled into less than a thousand words, but Alfian proves exceptionally deft here at capturing small moments that bespeak big narratives. Fully one-quarter of these pieces are good enough to find their way into Year's Best anthologies. I greatly hope that he returns to prose again in the future. Highly recommended.

Atikah Wahid says

This book is nothing short of brilliant. And this is coming from a person who hates flash fiction, mainly because I've never seen anyone write them well before. Alfian Saat's "Malay Sketches" is a nod to Frank Swettenham's "Malay Sketches" but whereas the latter is nonsensical colonialist literature that relies on racist tropes, Alfian's book sheds a light on Malay Singaporeans that is sincere, earnest and poignant. It is as though Alfian manages to tap into every Malay Singaporean's secret wound. In just a handful of paragraphs, Alfian is able to create glimpses of a world where issues like identity, sense of belonging, and racism are carefully explored. Every story is a marvel to read. The illustrations are gorgeous and fitting, too. Being a Malay, I initially assumed I could relate to this book. But being Malaysian, I am only looking in from the outside. It does make me rethink of my ideas of what Malayness means and how different it is when applied

to something beyond my own experience. A great read, it's a pity that it's actually quite difficult to find in Malaysia. Highly-recommended.
