WRITING HOME
Alfian Sa’at and the Politics of Malay Muslim Belonging in Global Multiracial Singapore

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This essay focuses on Malay Sketches, a collection of flash fiction written by Alfian Sa’at, the only Malay writer in Singapore who has produced a substantial body of work in English. Alfian represents the specific dynamics of Malay identity and inter-race relations in Singapore, where contemporary pressures of globality complicate the colonial legacies entrenched in everyday cross-cultural interactions. In his writing he attempts to prise a gap in the seal between race, religion and language that the state’s multiracial orthodoxy insists on enforcing, and to offer instead other permutations. By choosing deliberately to historicize structures of affect and sentiment, Alfian shows how the Singaporean state’s official ideology and wide-ranging policies have played a significant role in constructing Malay subjectivities and informing their sense of being at home in Singapore.

In the analysis of race and race relations, a dominant strategy adopted has been the demonstration of the fictional nature of race. Yet arguing that race is a shibboleth hardly helps us ‘unthink’ it: it does not help explain the power that race wields in the social imagination, elucidate its intensely felt reality, or take into account its possible role in social transformation. In his essay ‘How Real is Race?’ Michael Hames-Garcia considers it imperative that we come to grips with the complexity of race as ‘a produced, intra-active phenomenon, involving the modern/colonial gender system (itself a phenomenon with many intra-acting components), individual bodily differences and histories of family descent, as well as social ideologies and practices (including those of courts, legislatures, and police/prisons)’ (2008, 327). This dynamic and complex conception of race suggests how race can morph over time and space. At the same time, to intervene in the politics of race, we need, as Hames-Garcia goes on to argue, ‘creative racial identity projects more than we need philosophical arguments against race’ (331). By confronting the intransigence of race in avowedly global Singapore and examining the politics and possibilities of belonging for Malay Muslims, the fictional offering by writer Alfian Sa’at, Malay Sketches, may be said to constitute one such creative racial identity project.

Since national independence in 1965, Malay Muslims have occupied a fraught place in Singapore, viewed by a postcolonial government bent on development and modernization as a problem minority, given their relative lack of economic and educational achievement vis-à-vis the majority Chinese population. In the new millennium Malay Muslims in Singapore have been subject to even greater scrutiny as a result of global events like the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led ‘war on terror’, which have cast a spotlight on radical Islamism and religion as a potentially troubling axis of transnational identification.
A prominent bilingual and often controversial author, poet and playwright, Alfian Sa’at attempts to account for the power of race – its epistemological, ontological and affective power – in a way that few contemporary Singapore writers come close to articulating. As the only Malay writer to date to produce a substantial body of work in English, he commands a wider and more racially diverse readership in Singapore than other Malay-language writers. At the same time, however, because of his sexuality, gay activism and gay-themed plays and writing, he is far from being an unproblematic representative voice for many Malay Muslims. Focusing on *Malay Sketches*, a collection of flash fiction published in 2012, I examine how Alfian represents the specific dynamics of Malay identity and inter-race relations in a nation where contemporary pressures of globality complicate the colonial legacies entrenched in everyday cross-cultural interactions. By choosing deliberately to historicize structures of affect and sentiment, Alfian shows how the state, official ideology and wide-ranging policies have played a significant role in constructing Malay subjectivities and informing their sense of being at home in Singapore. Understanding his work in an oppositional sense, it is clear how Alfian seeks to write a home for Malays in his fiction, while at the same time also writing home to a Singapore about what it means to be Malay. In his writing he attempts to prise a gap in the seal between race, religion and language that the state’s multiracial orthodoxy insists on enforcing, and to offer instead other permutations. He uses the *tudung* or Islamic headscarf worn by Muslim and Malay Muslim women in Singapore as a metaphor of (un)veiling with which to probe the limits of racial tolerance and religious understanding. His symbolic appropriation of the *tudung* ultimately mediates his complex, paradoxical yearning for a better understanding of the Malays by other ethnic groups, while still retaining a sense of unknowability about Malayness which would serve to unsettle the dirigiste Singapore state’s economically pragmatic and increasingly neoliberal mode of governance.

To understand the racial politics in Alfian’s work, one needs first a sharper sense of the historical and contemporary place of the Malay minority in Singapore and the decisive role the postcolonial state has played in organizing and managing racial, ethnic and religious differences since political independence in 1965. The linchpin of the state has been the ideology of multiracialism, with its four racial categories – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) – inherited largely from British colonialism’s policy of ethnic separatism and divide-and-rule. Within this configuration the Malays are the largest ethnic minority group, comprising 13.3 per cent of the resident population of 3.8 million (Department of Statistics Singapore 2013).1 The vast majority of Malays, 99.6 per cent, are also Muslim, a fact that has led to the conflation of race and religion in the minds of many. Being a Muslim is, in other words, an inextricable part of Malayness both in the eyes of those who identify as Malay as well as other non-Malay Singaporeans. Since its establishment, official multiracialism has been assiduously translated into programmatic policies in education, housing and social governance which inform most – if not all – facets of daily living in Singapore. Multiracialism, the state reiterates constantly to its citizens, ensures that Singapore is a tolerant and harmonious society. Here, Wendy Brown’s analysis of tolerance as a ‘technology of domestic governmentality’ (2006, 87) is pertinent, as tolerance discourse in Singapore ensures the rigid demarcation of races and their organization in terms of mosaic rather than melting pot (Goh 2010), while also preserving the particular racial arithmetic that ensures Chinese demographic dominance. Tolerance, as Brown points out, ‘presumes the creature it needs to explain’ (2006, 86); thus it presupposes the ethnic conflict rooted in essentialist ideas about racial identity and difference it is meant to prevent.
The question then to ask of Singapore is not how it is a tolerant society but how tolerance helps produce a specific version of multiracialism and particular multiracial subjects.

The Malay presence challenges and discloses the tensions that reside in the Singapore state’s most cherished principles of multiracialism, meritocracy and secularism. Recognized in the nation’s constitution (Article 152) as the ‘indigenous people’ of Singapore, the Malays tend, more often than not, to be viewed by the state as a potential fifth column, given the country’s proximity to Malaysia and Indonesia, which have large Muslim majorities. Malay citizens have thus traditionally been excluded from top positions and combat roles in the military, for example. The notion that there exists a ‘Malay problem’ in Singapore is a familiar feature of public discourse and widely accepted, even among Malays themselves. It refers to the disproportionately higher incidence of social problems like drug abuse among the Malays (Kamaludeen 2007), as well as the minority group’s lower socioeconomic position relative to ethnic Chinese and Indians (Mutalib 2012, 45–62). Placed thus in competition with the other races, Malays are often seen as under-achievers needing to ‘catch up’ (Straits Times, 18 August), due to factors ranging from essentialist and racist justifications of inherent cultural deficiencies to government policies which compound such views and actively encourage Malays’ socioeconomic marginalization. The cultural and racial deficit theory implied in the former owes a debt to colonial and Orientalist stereotypes from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries about Malay backwardness, docility and indolence, and their inability to progress, a view most famously critiqued by Syed Hussein Alatas in The Myth of the Lazy Native. The postcolonial Singaporean state has compounded this colonial legacy through institutionalized practices that continue to marginalize Malays, such as the keeping of racial score cards. Apart from suggesting incommensurability, this, according to Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, also allows the ‘state and its agents [to] engage in a celebration of the deviant, in this case the Malay/Muslims, so as to consolidate the moral boundaries and the social norms of the majority’ (2007, 311).

The strong arm of the state in moulding Malay identity and views of Malayness in public consciousness may be seen not only in the way multiracialism is conceived of and operationalized in Singapore, but also in how the state asserts its secular identity. In Singapore the state has sought to observe a strict distinction between religion and politics, enacting specific legislation like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 to ensure that separation. Religion and race are routinely foregrounded in public discourse by the nation’s political leaders as a combustible combination that can all too easily destabilize the country. Besides legislation, the state has also set up numerous agencies to oversee the administration of the various religions in the country. In the case of Malay Muslims, it is a government-linked, statutory board – the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) or Islamic Religious Council – established in 1968. It has been argued that the Singapore state’s brand of secularism is more than just about sequestering religion from politics and keeping it a personal, private affair. Lily Zubaidah Rahim describes Singapore’s secularism as ‘authoritarian top-down assertive secularism’ (2012, 183) which aims to control and police religion. Moreover, Islam, to a larger extent than the other religions, is often seen as potentially posing a threat to national goals, and Muslims in particular are urged to be more tolerant. This sense of the vexed place of Islam in Singapore was memorably underscored by the so-called ‘tudung controversy’.
The *tudung* controversy tested the state’s avowed principles of secularism and multiracial and religious equality. In 2002 a few Malay Muslim parents explicitly flouted the ban on *tudungs* or headscarfs in government-run secular schools by insisting their daughters be attired in *tudungs* and modified school uniforms. The parents refused to budge in the ensuing stand-off with the schools and the Ministry of Education, and the primary school girls were suspended as a result. The incident received extensive coverage in both local and international media, with many commentators calling the parental action an act of civil disobedience to protest against an unconstitutional ban. The Singapore state justifies this ban on the grounds that the school is a common space for interracial and religious interaction and that the school uniform equalizes students, promotes interaction and strengthens national unity. The issue is thus not about prohibiting the overt use of religious symbols, as is the case in France, since Sikh schoolboys in Singapore are allowed to wear the turban. Yet, as some have pointed out, the ban has been self-defeating, leading instead to increased enrolment in the madrasahs rather than fulfilling the avowed aim of greater social integration.

Wearing the headscarf as part of practising hijab or dressing modestly has become more common among Malay Muslim women in Singapore now compared, for example, to the 1950s and 1960s. This development occurred in line with the global Islamic Renaissance and revival in the 1970s. Historically, in the beginning of the twentieth century, as many nationalist movements gathered pace, Muslim women in places like Egypt discarded their veils in a symbolic move to signal modernity, although the gesture did not mean one was any less a Muslim. Today the resurgence of the veil is testimony to the many meanings it has acquired – including that of a modern, Muslim identity. Leila Ahmed notes how in Egypt and the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s, respectively, wearing the hijab became for a minority group an act of defiance ‘challenging the inequities and injustices of mainstream society’ (2011, 210), as well as an affirmation of identity and values. In contemporary societies with Muslim minorities, veiling – especially after 9/11 – is regularly an act of anti-Islamophobia, an assertion of Islamic pride and religious solidarity as well as a ‘kind of hyperperformativity whereby Muslim communities and individuals interpolate themselves into the framing narrative of irreconcilable difference’ (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 193) as a way of resisting assimilation. Voluntary veiling by women is often justified as an assertion of identity rather than acquiescence to male power. However, in Singapore, the *tudung* controversy stoked suspicions about intolerant Islam and Muslims as potential terrorists and extremists, especially in the wake of the 2001 arrest and detention without trial of fifteen Malay Muslim men who were suspected of having al-Qaeda connections and planning bomb attacks around the city. The Malay problem has thus in effect become a ‘Malay Muslim problem’ (Kamaludeen, Pereira and Turner 2010, 35) as global events have created further tensions in the relationship between the state and Malay Muslims.

Compounding the way Malay identity in Singapore is often overdetermined by transnational forces shaping the larger Muslim world is the fact that Malay Muslims in Singapore have never been a homogeneous group. Differences in class, education, religiosity and social status mean there are always competing views about Malay Muslim identity, the desired relations between the community and the state, and the way religion should be practised in a secular society. According to Suzaina Kadir, ‘Muslim politics in Singapore can therefore be characterized by the horizontal contestations of meanings and a vertical contest for legitimate representation of the Islamic society...
to the state’ (2004, 369–370). Straining this national frame are the transnational pressures precipitated by global events like 9/11 and, more recently, the Arab Spring and the oppression of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar’s Rakhine State. Understanding and articulating the position of Malay Muslims in Singapore thus requires the geocolonial historical materialist analysis of coupling the local to the world that Kuan-Hsing Chen describes in *Asia as Method*. Chen emphasizes ‘the specificity of dynamic local histories’ and the need to pay attention to ‘how local history, in dialectical interaction with colonial and other historical forces, transforms its internal formation on the one hand, and articulates the local to world history and the structure of global capital on the other hand’ (2010, 66).

**Reading Malay Sketches**

The feelings of marginality, plus the national and transnational tensions faced by Malay Muslims in the contemporary moment, provide fertile ground for Alfian Sa’at’s fictive imagination. His book of flash fiction, *Malay Sketches*, published in 2012 but containing stories written over a ten-year period, with some appearing first on his blog, explores Malay subjectivity and the sense of belonging felt by Malay Muslims in Singapore as these related issues are informed by the specific confluence of colonial and postcolonial histories, and the exigencies of state policies on multiracialism, secularism and meritocracy I have outlined above. The very title of the collection is of course significant for deliberately echoing a similarly entitled book by Sir Frank Swettenham, the Malay-speaking governor and commander-in-chief of the Straits Settlements from 1901 to 1904. Swettenham’s book, published in 1895, belongs to the kind of ethnographic colonial discourse based on dominant racial theories of the time produced to ‘describe’ colonized indigenous groups, their customs, and invariably ‘traditional’ way of life. In his *Malay Sketches* Swettenham takes ‘the Malay of the Peninsula’ as his object, purporting to describe him rather romantically ‘as he has been these hundreds of years’ just before he is irredeemably transformed by the ‘Juggernaut of Progress’ (x).

On one level, Alfian’s *Malay Sketches* may thus be read in the classic sense of the empire writing back – as a text with insider knowledge giving voice to a marginalized group and celebrating a culture previously denied the means of self-representation. It lends weight to Robert Young’s observation about post-colonialism always having to do with ‘the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies’ (2012, 21). As a Malay sketching the customs, practices and feelings of those in his racial group, Alfian deliberately presents the ‘convivial’ (Gilroy 2006, xv) practices of race and multicultural relations that evade or defy the state’s racial policing. Rather cheekily, he chooses for his epigraph a line borrowed from Swettenham’s text: ‘The tale of these little lives is told. If I have failed to bring you close to the Malay, so that you could see into his heart, understand something of his life … then the fault is mine.’ In ventriloquizing Swettenham and his tone of false modesty, Alfian is of course being deliberately ironic. The irony sheathes a more pointed barb, however, since, like Swettenham, Alfian has a didactic aim in writing *Malay Sketches*. With its self-consciously contemporary feel, Alfian’s text is writing back not just to colonial authority and received categories of colonial knowledge, but also to modern Singapore society and the state. The mere fact that the state and non-Malays still require ‘educating’ serves as a damning indictment of the ignorance characterizing present-day race relations in Singapore.
In examining the vicissitudes of being Malay Muslim in contemporary Singapore, Alfian employs multiple voices and perspectives, cutting across age, class and gender, to offer up a kaleidoscopic view of Malay culture and to raise the question about what Malayness means. In choosing to write flash fiction, also known as ‘microfiction’, Alfian builds on the short-story form, which as a genre has had a distinct tradition in Singapore’s literary history, ‘assimilating the locale and life here’, in the words of poet and short-story writer Arthur Yap (2014, 69). At the same time, there is also a significant departure here, as these sketches go beyond incorporating and reflecting local realities; they arise from Alfian being a social media-savvy writer who blogs and comments extensively on topical social and political issues using digital and online platforms rather than more traditional media. His choice of form, in other words, is of a piece with his sociopolitical activism, his mode of performance as a public intellectual, and his desire to effect social change.

Malay Sketches contains stories stressing the everyday life of ordinary Malays; for example, the Malay Muslim woman who falls for a non-Malay Muslim (‘Foreign Language’), the Malay undergraduate studying in New York (‘Visitors’), the Chinese man who converts to Islam when he marries a Malay Muslim woman (‘The Convert’), the English-speaking Malay boy who gets humiliated every time he goes for a haircut by the Malay barber (‘The Barbershop’), and the family of the man held in custody for links with suspected terrorists (‘Proof’). The undercurrent of didacticism in Alfian’s work is most apparent in the stories which deal with specific elements in the Malay cultural imaginary and folk beliefs like the toyol and the pontianak. Whereas, in the case of Swettenham, the idea of the sketch evokes a certain dilettantism, a pose of false modesty inextricably linked to the exercise of colonial power, for Alfian, the sketch as flash fiction provides an opportunity for suggestive vignettes of race while all the time insisting on the incomplete nature of racial knowledge. His sketches disclose race as a vexing and often unstable ontological category. At their best, Alfian’s flash fiction sketches serve as flashpoints to provoke a deeper consideration of race, as readers are brought into the liminal, unsettling and productive space of knowing and unknowing Malayness, and led to interrogate the ways in which we construct racial and cultural knowledge. With their often-ambiguous endings, many of the stories are delicately poised in a momentary textual equilibrium that belies the difficulty—if not impossibility—of easy resolution. Collectively, they also appear as snapshot fragments to trouble the linear and developmental narrative of national progress the state has always been anxious to promulgate.

Alfian pinpoints the dislocation faced by Malay Muslims in Singapore in stories like ‘After the Dusk Prayers’ and ‘Overnight’. Both draw attention to historically the most important act of dislocation for Malays—the relocation by the state of groups of the population from kampungs or villages to public housing in the form of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats as part of rapid development and modernization plans for the nation. With the force of poetic conciseness, Alfian represents the destruction of the kampungs as a wound that has never healed. Malay subjectivity, henceforth, is one that is constituted and haunted by loss. The trauma of that original for-cible act by the state lingers on and manifests itself in the quiet loneliness of older Malays like Mak Jah in ‘After the Dusk Prayers’, who feeds the stray cats in the neighbourhood, perhaps, she muses, as ‘a kind of penance’ (Alfian 2012, 39) for having left behind the cat Comot when she and her family had moved from the kampung years ago. In another story, ‘Overnight’, going camping is seen as an attempt to simulate the experience of living in the kampung. Thus Farisha, the main
protagonist, who is nostalgic for her past childhood in a kampung, takes her family camping by the beach. The irony is not lost on her: ‘The government took away our kampung ... and they gave us camping!’ (42). The story begins with a description of the idyllic nature of the activity and the communal spirit among the campers, which is rudely interrupted by the arrival of park rangers the next morning to check campers’ permits. To Farisha, there was ‘something familiar about the proceedings’ (43), as the trauma of eviction is re-enacted and the struggle against overbearing state authority continues.

Indeed, the sense of uncanniness in the eviction recalls the disorienting moment of realization that Homi Bhabha has called the ‘unhomely’. Bhabha writes that the unhomely occurs when ‘the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions’. Thus ‘the home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world’ (1992, 141). The intrusion of the postcolonial dirigiste state and the disorientation caused by history in the name of national progress produces an unhomeliness within the Malay subject which cannot be easily dispelled.2 Farisha comes to the conclusion that ‘no reminiscence of the kampung was complete without the memory of eviction: a rooster crowing at dusk, a roof collapsing under rain, and the ember of a mosquito coil fading from orange, to grey, to a delicate pellet of dust’ (Alfian 2012, 43). These evocative and tenderly melancholic images feel like the aestheticized products of memory, abstracted and distanced from the original historical event yet forever having a life in the poetic unconscious – tenacious and overdetermined if also always incomplete.

The unhomeliness of the Malay Muslim in Singapore is further explored at the psychic and visceral level in the stories which dwell specifically on what it means to be Malay. Thus, Alfian exploits to the full and extends to its logical if perplexing conclusion the perverse logic underpinning notions about the Malay problem and Chinese success in the story ‘Shallow Focus’. As Barr and Low have elaborated, the stereotype of being Chinese in Singapore means to be ‘materialistic, concerned with education as measured by grades and certificates, obsessively concerned with social mobility and, above all, is kiasu – a Hokkien word meaning “afraid to lose”, which in Singapore parlance has come to refer to a manic fear of losing out on something or to someone’ (2005, 167). Since educational and economic success is so tightly associated with the Chinese, it follows that any desire for advancement and upward social mobility may be seen as a dilution of Malay identity. Thus, in ‘Shallow Focus’, the Malay protagonist and narrator views his graduation and academic achievement with ambivalence. To his mother’s suggestion that they pose for a family photograph at a studio, he counters bad-temperedly, ‘When did we become a Chinese family? ... Only Chinese people do this kind of thing’ (Alfian 2012, 73). The narrator’s disquiet is further heightened when the freelance photographer coincidentally turns out to be an old school friend and former rival, a Chinese by the name of Min Heng, whom his mother had advised years before he should emulate in order to beat him at the academic game.

The narrator’s attempts to make sense of the situation reflect the ontological difficulty in which he finds himself ensnared – the absurd yet nevertheless keenly felt possibility that one may indeed become another race given the particular coalescence of essentialist and constructivist ideas underpinning multiracialism in Singapore. The narrator recalls his mother’s words: ‘Always follow whatever the Chinese students do. Find out what’s their secret’
Disconcerted by his mother’s secret pleasure that he had somehow surpassed Min Heng now that he was a graduate and an engineer, the narrator explodes in irritation, ‘Does that mean I’ve become more Chinese than him?’ (75). Here, then, is the double bind of the Malay Muslim minority in a deeply racialized Singapore where class and racial identities are so intertwined that academic success and social mobility precipitate guilt and an existential crisis of identity. The story ends on a note of displacement—the narrator’s confusion is left unresolved and only the desire for clarity and inward vision is clear as he gazes at the photographs of flowers his sister had taken. He observes ‘the light illuminating and exposing the veins on their translucent petals’ (75) as if the close-up shot of a vascular network might somehow contain the key to the intricate tangle of identities that so perplexes him.

Alfian’s critique of how class mobility and advancement are experienced as betrayal for the Malay subject is carefully captured in the story ‘The Morning Ride’. Amin’s father works as a driver for a (Chinese) family, chauffeuring his boss’s son Kevin to the very school that his own son attends. The disclosure of this last fact by Amin’s father leads Amin to consider how his father struggles to maintain his sense of dignity despite the low status of his job. Amin remembers, for example, how his father had threatened to quit when his boss’s wife, using the possessive and the generic name for Malay drivers, had referred to him as ‘my Ahmad’. Embedded in this incident is a history of economic marginalization and stereotyping experienced by the Malays in Singapore. Amin realizes the irony of the situation: because he is like Kevin by virtue of being in the same school, there is a sense that he has ‘superceded his father’ (70). Living in Singapore, Amin comes to the conclusion that ‘There would always be a Kevin looking over his shoulder’ (70), an evocative line suggesting the spectral presence of the Chinese haunting every move by the Malays. This is another dilemma of the Malay minority—in inevitable comparison with the Chinese majority, with little room for dictating the terms. Locked into constant competition, race politics infiltrates even the most private and intimate familial bonds. The narrator comes to a bitter-sweet recognition of his father’s unspoken knowledge that his love for his son and desire for him to get ahead must inevitably involve distance and separation that at its most extreme may even be experienced as a form of betrayal of father by son. Thus, Alfian plays ironically with different notions of distance—emotional as well as academic, social and economic—in his last line: ‘Only by overtaking his father, Amin thought, would he be able to get close to the source of his father’s secret pride’ (70).

Alfian trenchantly explores the intersubjective psychic and familial dislocations caused by history in his story ‘Two Brothers’. Here, twin brothers make opposing decisions about their lives and future, with one brother, Helmy, having relocated to Malaysia from Singapore. Helmy finds opportunities and career advancement while Hazry, a documentary cameraman, is stuck professionally in Singapore. The brothers’ story is the legacy of the history of failed political merger between Singapore and Malaysia (1963–1965), as one brother chooses to migrate to Malaysia and be a member of the majority race there. It brings to the fore the question that Alfian asks in other stories like ‘A Starry Hill’ about what keeps Malays in Singapore when Malaysia beckons, and serves as well as a reminder about the arbitrariness yet undeniable power of national borders. The back-and-forth dialogue between the two brothers contains the twists and turns of being Malay and part of a minority in Singapore. For Helmy, Malays have no future in Singapore, as he explains their marginalization in terms of the nation’s language use. Where an earlier generation had used Malay to communicate with each other and their own generation used English, the next generation would have to use Chinese. He argues: ‘What do
you think the next generation will use? They’re creating this environment where you’ll lose out if you don’t speak it. And they’re using market forces to do this. They’re importing monolingual speakers to put pressure on us’ (197). Helmy’s assessment may be tongue-in-cheek but it explicitly yokes neoliberalism to discrimination, making the latter seem even more inevitable.

Hazry’s ambivalence about leaving Singapore and embracing Malaysia stems from an inchoate loyalty to the past and his immediate place of origin; it is a stubborn if inarticulate attempt to reject Helmy’s schematic assessment that ‘When it comes down to it, it’s all about race’ (198). When Helmy justifies his decision to leave Singapore by saying, ‘I’m pragmatic, Hazry’ (198), the latter counters with the line, ‘That’s very Singaporean of you, Helmy. Maybe you’re much more Singaporean than you think’ (198). The irony of Helmy leaving his country because he is pragmatic, a quintessentially Singaporean trait, is pointedly made. The moment encapsulates the difficulty Malay subjects face when articulating their sense of identity in Singapore, trapped as they often are in a circular argument and stymied by an impoverished rhetoric about identity determined by official ideology and discourse: ‘A kind of silence had begun to settle between us, a silence that could either mean an impasse, or a truce’ (198). In this story and ‘The Morning Ride’ the repercussions of state ideology and public pronouncements on Malay subjectivity and private familial relations – the historical basis of sentiment and subjectivity, in other words – are thus made manifest.

Not unexpectedly, the tudung’s function as a marker of identity and difference appears in Alfian’s sketches. In Singapore, wearing a headscarf is primarily an expression of religious and ethnic identity for many Malay Muslim women. The decision to do so is figured as a complex choice by Muslim women, often irreducible to any one reason. In interviews, many Muslim women in Singapore who wear the veil full-time explain that veiling ‘had become a rite of passage, which marked an exit from a secular life into being aware about leading a fully committed religious life’ (Kamaludeen, Pereira and Turner 2010, 91). Two of Alfian’s stories in particular use the tudung as a trope for exploring the similarly complex sense of home Malay Muslims have in Singapore. In this respect they perform a kind of unveiling for non-Malay Muslims of what it means to be a minority race. In 2002, in response to the tudung controversy, Alfian Sa’at blogged:

I see a schoolgirl from a madrasah wearing a tudung … I want to go up to her and hug her, and tell her how her tudung is not just a symbol of modesty but a symbol of inscrutability. That layer of cloth makes her suspicious to others, it can be used to smuggle in a grenade or an agenda, so she will never get a frontline desk job, she will be expected to hang around with other tudung-wearing women in the university… If I can tell the girl one thing, it is ‘integration is not assimilation’, or ‘tolerance is a failure in understanding’ even though it is something she will take time to understand. (Alfian 2002)

It is precisely this notion of inscrutability and opacity which Alfian endorses as necessary opposition to ignorance, assimilationist pressure and an overbearing state. The tudung represents an unknowability which he seeks to preserve as part of Malay identity in order to defy the compulsive desire of the state for complete control over meaning. But just as the tudung is a form of veiling, it also serves, on another level, as a mirror reflecting to Singapore society the state of its own multiracial complexion.
'Losing Touch' centres on a young tudung-wearing narrator who causes a scandal by refusing to shake the Singapore president’s hand at a prize-giving ceremony for top Malay Muslim students, in keeping with the Islamic prohibition against physical contact with the opposite sex. The incident causes outrage and provokes different reactions from her family members, with her father observing grimly that her action just makes it easier for ‘them’ to call us extremists' (Alfian 2012, 21). The story ends on a note of uncertainty, with the narrator before a postbox having dropped her letter of explanation to the president into either the slot that says ‘Singapore’ or the one labelled ‘Other Countries’. The symbolism of the moment calls to mind the multiple meanings attached to the story’s title. Does living in Singapore for the minority race inevitably mean losing touch with one’s religion and culture? Do the races necessarily lose touch with each other by not shaking hands? At the same time, the story also asks if we have lost touch with the reason why we carry out certain practices. Why, for example, as the young protagonist wonders, have we adopted the handshake as the gesture of greeting, good will and congratulations? Her question discloses the arbitrary basis of our most normalized rituals.

The right to don the tudung is the central focus of another story, ‘The Drawer’, where the narrator is a Malay Muslim mother who is worried about her daughter Maria’s inability to find a job. She suspects it is because Maria insists on wearing her tudung when she goes for job interviews. Reflecting on her daughter’s lack of success, the narrator laments that all the prospective employers only seem to want people who can speak Chinese, concluding that ‘this had become their country and one had to play by their rules’ (159). Thus, she decides one day to hide the tudung Maria had chosen to wear for her interview. Frantically, the latter starts looking for her headscarf. ‘She opened her drawers and threw out various scarves. It looked like a magic show that had gone very wrong’ (157). The allusion to the magic show is comic but the humour belies the fact there is indeed something magical and talismanic about the headscarf in the way it transforms identity, empowers the individual, alters perception and relations. In this story, donning the tudung is an assertion of one’s rights, and one’s place in multiracial and multi-cultural Singapore. Watching her daughter leave, the narrator imagines Maria’s tudung being caught in the door of the taxi: ‘I had never seen such a thing happen before, but I pictured her anger like this small flag being whipped in the wind’ (158). The image suggests the narrator’s daughter has planted a flag and staked out her position in Singapore territory. Empowerment is infectious – later, when her daughter successfully secures a job, the narrator is emboldened enough to perform her own small act of resistance by asking the Chinese driver of her cab to change radio channels when he turns up the volume of a Chinese song. In thus daring to contest the normalizing power of the Chinese majority and Chinese culture, the narrator effectively reclaims a home for herself.

In representing the everyday challenges and experiences of being Malay Muslim in Singapore, Alfian offers a fractal picture of a heterogeneous minority group in constant negotiation with the state and its fellow races over its place in the nation. By engaging with specifically local problems and global issues as they affect Malay society, Malay Sketches vigorously rebuts any unchanging, abstracted notion of Malayness that inheres in the official identification of a ‘Malay problem’. However, beyond representation, Alfian’s flash fiction ultimately constitutes an intervention to help us begin the process of reimagination so vital to forming alternative subjectivities, diverse ways of belonging, and competing versions of national life.
References


