

Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays Three: Nadirah, Parah, Your Sister's Husband, Geng Rebut Cabinet (GRC)*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019. 292 pp. ISBN 978-981-14-0042-1.



As with his two earlier anthologies of plays, Alfian's third collection has a tally on the cover indicating the number of times certain keywords appear in the text. The keywords for this volume are "Malay," "Chinese," "Indian," "Race," "Religion," "Minority," "Human" and "Love," signaling to the reader the general subject matter of the selected plays. They all deal with how these various categories intersect, whether at the personal level, as in *Nadirah*, *Your Sister's Husband* and *Parah*, or at the state level (*Geng Rebut Cabinet*); at the same time, all four plays are situated at the blurred crossroads of the private and the public. Alfian addresses large topics, but encapsulates them in intimate interactions. The tally also signals to us that Alfian is going to overturn some of these categories, or at least to upset them in some way. For a start, we immediately see that the word "Malay" is used almost twice as many times (145) as the word "Chinese" (82) – a stark reversal of Singapore's Chinese dominance. "Religion" and "Love" come in at 20 and 23 respectively, suggesting that both are equally significant in the worlds he draws here – and also perhaps highlighting the centrality of religion to the Malay experience. "Minority" is the least-used of the selected words (only 6 times), which is interesting given the position of the Malays in Singapore as a minority

community. That status is not highlighted here (except, perhaps, in reverse – in *Geng Rebut Cabinet*), thus again overturning expectations and upsetting norms. It is also, I believe, important that these plays were all originally in Malay, and have been translated for this volume; Alfian's first instinct or desire was to write for the Malay community, and only then cater to those not competent in the Malay language.

Nadirah, Your Sister's Husband and *Geng Rebut Cabinet* all deal, in quite different ways, with what it means to be Malay in Singapore. *Nadirah* offers the most straightforward narrative, but deals with the thorny question of how religion, identity and social pressure intersect to influence an individual's choices and behaviour. The main character, Nadirah, is the daughter of Sahirah, a Chinese woman who converted to Islam to marry Nadirah's father, from whom she is now divorced. The daughter fears that her mother might become an apostate, because she is considering marrying Robert, a Christian. At University, Nadirah is interested in initiating interfaith dialogues, but has a hard time doing the same with Sahirah. Is religion a matter of individual belief, or of expediency? Alfian avoids providing answers, but we do see Nadirah not only making peace with her mother's and Robert's relationship, but also embarking on a trip to Israel to further her religious understanding. The play is not some anthemic call for all Singaporeans to understand the Malays, or for the Malays to approach religion and identity in a particular way. It just offers a complex approach which disrupts superficial and stereotyped views of Malay identity.

Your Sister's Husband is a funnier play which deals more with cultural identity, and also looks at how those identities play out within the Singapore social framework. It features five sisters, four of whom are married and/or have careers. The fifth, Maslindah Selamat, is a skewed reflection of suspected terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari, who was imprisoned but managed to escape and evade detection, despite being hampered by a limp. In the original production, Maslindah was played by a man; but Alfian makes clear that this is not to be a drag performance. The actor plays a female character, but "should not efface his masculinity; this is what makes the character peculiar and unnerving" (159). Why, though, should the character be "peculiar and unnerving"? The other four sisters are played conventionally, by women. Significantly, they also fit into the kind of mould required of them in Singapore – productive, adhering to social requirements. Maslindah, however, seems beyond anyone's control. They never really know where she is or what she is doing, and she holds on stubbornly to a very traditional Malay identity: she offers to cook "jackfruit grave with fermented durian sambal" (while her sisters eat macaron straight from Paris) (170). This is a far cry from her sisters. Zuraidah, for example, declares with pride that "our contribution to the Malay community" is to do exactly what other aspirational Singaporeans are doing (202). And her sisters applaud, except for Maslindah. In the end, Maslindah disappears mysteriously, though her sisters suspect that she is

still around, disguised, leaving little tokens which hark back to Malay tradition and heritage. Throughout the play she is an outlier, holding doggedly on to a heritage which, in the hands of her sisters, is slowly disappearing. Just as the fact that Maslindah is played by a man can make the audience uncomfortable, the insistence on Malay culture is also likely to cause discomfort.

The marginality of Malay culture to life in Singapore is highlighted in *Geng Rebut Cabinet*, which is set in an alternate universe where the Malays are the dominant ethnic group, and political parties must make an effort to field a token Chinese candidate in elections. The role-reversal catches the reader/audience out, making them rethink the status quo that otherwise is taken for granted. The play is also funny, with a heavy dose of satire thrown in. Roslan, for example, declares that Catherine should not use emotive words like “rich” and “poor.” Instead, people should be called “upper middle class” or “lower middle class” or “lower lower middle class” – “But what’s important is that all of us belong to the middle class. So we won’t have any class warfare” (220). This iteration of Singapore seems to have embraced Newspeak with a vengeance. In the end, Catherine has a dream in which the country is dominated by a Chinese majority, and says wistfully that she “didn’t want to wake up at all” (272) – echoing, perhaps, the dreams of Singapore’s minorities. But she has to wake up and face a reality in which her election is seen as the fulfilment of “the dreams of thousands of Chinese” (273). Just as Maslindah’s male presence brings about discomfort in the audience, so does the reversal of power roles here.

Unlike the other three plays, *Parah* is set in Malaysia, and centres around a group of good friends (one Chinese, one Indian and two Malays, reflecting the ethnic framework on which society in Malaysia and Singapore are built) whose friendship is shattered when they are forced to confront issues like race and belonging, and their growing awareness of underlying social and political issues pushes them apart. Hafiz begins to feel the need to assert his Malay identity more strongly. Mahesh and Kahoe are made to confront their ambivalent positions – othered by state discourse, they still feel a personal sense of belonging, and the tension between these two states is not resolved. In this play, Alfian displays a keen awareness of the very different position occupied by the Malays in Malaysia. In all the plays anthologised here, Alfian opens a space for minority voices to be heard.

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