

Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays One: The Optic Trilogy, Fugitives, Homesick, sex.violence.blood.gore.* Singapore: Ethos 2010. 329 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-6065-3.

The cover of Alfian Sa'at's anthology *Collected Plays One* plunges us quickly into a consideration of his main concerns as a Singaporean writer. Certain words have been listed – Singapore, home, lah, love, money, change, memory and Lee Kuan Yew; this list is followed by a tally of how many times each word appears in the text. Predictably, perhaps, “Singapore” has the highest tally, followed by “home.” And this indicates Alfian's central preoccupation – Singapore as home. How does Singapore function as home for the varied characters he portrays, from the woman on the verge of migrating to Australia, to the disintegrating family consisting of a racist and resentful father, religious mother, displaced daughter and idealistic son, to the highly dispersed family trapped in the house by a SARS quarantine, to two transvestites on the MRT?

The other keywords are also instructive: “lah,” so much a part of the linguistic identity of Singapore; “love” as an exploration of the fractured relationships between people; “money” as an issue that has always been fundamental to Singapore; “change” as the only constant in a country under construction; “memory” as a way, perhaps, to counter that constant change. Interestingly, memory is mentioned only 5 times – suggesting a drive to look to the future rather than the past. Lee Kuan Yew is mentioned only once.

As a writer, Alfian has committed himself to engaging with Singaporean issues of identity, family, culture, and belonging. This is in distinct contrast with some theatre practitioners in Singapore who, according to Ivan Heng, in his “Foreword” to the anthology, have an “obsession with global markets,” and as a result have produced “works that are either blandly generic or garishly exotic” (9). Instead, Alfian deals with issues on an individual, deeply personal level, avoiding and even railing against “some existing versions of national culture,” as C.J.W.-L. Wee says in his introduction, to create “complex affirmations of a Singapore multicultural that need not – perhaps even must not – come about by being ‘a patriot/ of the will,’ as poet Lee Tzu Pheng has put it” (12).

The plays can be disturbingly confronting for those who come from cultures where non-confrontation and avoidance are the norm. Racial tensions are dealt with by being put in a box labelled “sensitive,” and left untouched and unexamined. Alfian, however, puts these issues under a bright spotlight. In *Fugitives*, the Father, a failed Singapore Chinese businessman, laments that he has had to sell his Mercedes:

FATHER: I sold my car to an Indian man. I didn't want to at first, but he offered the highest price for it. I didn't want to think too much about it. Imagine, one day one of my friends spots my white Mercedes on the road and they see this black man driving it. (88)

Zainal, a Singapore Malay boy who is doing his National Service in the same camp as the Son, also foregrounds race as a fundamental factor in Singapore's social framework. The Malays and Indians, he says, are invisible in the media: "Why the TV inside the bus cannot show Malay or Indian show? Not practical what. Who want to watch? Why Malay face cannot sell credit card? Not practical, because most people who got credit card are Chinese" (95).

These are the ugly, irrational resentments and prejudices which underlie so many aspects of social relationships, but they are rarely articulated so baldly (and, in the case of the Father's rant, so disturbingly) in such a public forum. It can be difficult and confronting to read, but it is necessary to recognise that this is what underlies the appearance of harmony. Recognition, perhaps, can lead to resolution. The Father and Samad (who now owns the Father's former business) do finally confront each other, bringing their ingrained racial and cultural prejudices out into the open, and the final result is that a small bridge of understanding and consideration is built. Alfian does not provide a mawkish happy ending – just a hint of deeper understanding, and the possibilities it brings.

Homesick is another bluntly honest piece, dealing with the Kohs, the kind of family that is becoming increasingly common in Singapore: the parents remain in Singapore, but most of the children have chosen to work and study elsewhere. They have returned "home" for their father's birthday, but he is in hospital with suspected SARS, and because of this, the whole family is placed under quarantine. This enforced closeness leads to confrontations and revelations, and some resolutions. The title of the play can obviously be read on several levels: the dispersed siblings might be feeling homesick for Singapore; they all end up stuck in the family home because of the possibility of illness; or they might just be sick of home. Again, Alfian gives no easy answer.

Racism is again presented in an uncomfortably confronting way. One sister, Marianne, is married to a Singaporean Indian; she is aghast when one of her brothers reveals a response that is fundamentally racist, and asks in disbelief "all this time and all you can see sitting here is a dark-skinned man?" (201). But as with *Fugitives*, Alfian's final vision is not completely bleak. Most of the siblings decide to head back to their lives overseas. The mother, Patricia, discovers that her husband has a mistress from mainland China, who is pregnant. Patricia decides to divorce her husband and leave him to be cared for by the mistress, Cindy. She leaves the home that she has built with him, and also decides to leave her home, Singapore, to visit her children. Cindy and the

baby she is carrying represent a new and different future for Singapore – a reflection of the demographic reality of Singapore. But it is also significant that the youngest son, Patrick, commits himself to a future in Singapore – not because he is happy there, but because he wants to fight what makes him unhappy:

PATRICK: ... But I think each time someone says goodbye it's a way of saying 'yes.' Yes, you win. Yes, I give up. Yes, you're right, I can't change anything. I want to have that privilege to say 'no.' And I can only say 'no' if I stick around. Does that make sense? (233)

Probably the most unusual and confrontational piece in this collection is *sex.violence.blood.gore*, six short scenes which take on the restrictions and the regulations which control much of Singapore life. The first scene, for example, features a woman, a geography teacher (assumed by her family to be a life-long virgin) who discovers and is thoroughly brought alive by sex. The scene is overwrought and hilarious, with the woman putting on her dominatrix gear, and making her nephews give her a “geography quiz” about all the kinkiest make-out spots in Singapore. But society, in the shape of her very conventional sister, cannot handle this new woman – so the woman jumps out the window and her sister, convinced that her boys have been “contaminated” by exposure to their aunt’s new personality, pushes them out the window as well. Alfian also deals with a meeting between two straight boys (one Chinese, one Malay) and two transvestites (also one Chinese and one Malay) on an MRT train. His explorations of gender and racial identity are complex – for example, each of the straight boys is fascinated by the story of the transvestite of the *other* race; but they cannot listen to the story of the person from their own race. In the end, Alfian presents the two transvestites as being more certain of who they are. The play ends with the two straight boys, who were so contemptuous of the transvestites, deciding to castrate themselves because they are bored.

Alfian’s collection reveals a fiercely committed, inventive individual who seeks to challenge, to confront, and hopefully to resolve.

Susan Philip
University of Malaya, Malaysia