

Gregory Nalpon's "The Rose and the Silver Key": A Historicist Reading

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Abstract

Gregory Nalpon, while today a virtually forgotten Singaporean writer, represents one of the most unique, imaginative and colourful voices in Singapore fiction, c. 1960-80. This paper focusses on Nalpon's most well-known, and perhaps most accomplished short story, "The Rose and the Silver Key." By subjecting Nalpon's story to a careful historicist reading I suggest that the distinctive qualities of "The Rose and the Silver Key" derive from both the specific moment and the normally marginalised figures represented, as well as Nalpon's fairly unique stance, in the Singapore as Indian, trades unionist and "gentleman of leisure." At the same time this historicist reading complements Frank Brennan's earlier benevolent reading, revealing "The Rose and the Silver Key" as mediated and often beguilingly ambiguous social critique of the colonial city c. 1960 and the nation state c. 1978.

Keywords

Rose, key, Gregory Nalpon, Robert Yeo, Singapore, short story

Gregory Nalpon's "The Rose and the Silver Key," was first published in Volume II of *Singapore Short Stories*, edited by Robert Yeo (1978). That Yeo originally placed Nalpon's story between Catherine Lim's "The Taximan's Story" and Theresa Ng's "By the Well" in Part One of Volume two of his anthology, "as an aperitif," suggests that Yeo regarded Nalpon's story as accomplished, important and representative; in short, a story likely, Yeo hoped, to stimulate Singaporean readers' appetites for short stories written by local writers. "The Rose and the Silver Key" was also included in the shorter one volume edition of *Singapore Short Stories*, published in 1989. As this edition became a Singapore O Level Literature in English text during the early 1990s, a period in which the subject still remained an active core component of the local curriculum, Nalpon's story was read, studied and written about by hundreds of

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Singaporean upper secondary students. In June 1991 "The Rose and the Silver Key" was one of three stories from Yeo's collection to be dramatised for the stage by Stella Kon and the Act 3 theatre company in a production entitled "Singapore Short Stories." The *Straits Times* reported,

More than 4,500 tickets for 14 scheduled performances of the Act 3 production were sold out two months in advance... 5,216 people, more than three-quarters of whom are students will now see the show. As the director of the show noted, 'One reason for the triple bill's popularity is that the book is an O-level text.' ("S'pore Short Stories a Sell-out" 24)²

In his introduction to the original edition of *Singapore Short Stories* (1978), Yeo broadly identifies two kinds of early Singaporean short story, c. 1945-78: "stories of social realism" and "stories of the inner life." But he also goes on to identify,

another category [of Singapore short story] not frequently found here and that is the part-real, part-allegorical kind best exemplified by the stories of Gregory Nalpon, of which "The Rose and the Silver Key" is one of the best examples. (Vol. I, xiii)

For Yeo, Nalpon's "stories take off from fact into fantasy and often end with the meaning not quite unravelled" (Vol. 1, xiii). Yeo here draws attention to Nalpon's juxtaposition in his short stories of, on the one hand, the "real," "fact," i.e. the plebeian quotidian of late colonial Singapore/early post-colonial Singapore, and on the other, the "allegorical," "fantasy," i.e. elements of folktale, fairytale and the supernatural, often resulting in thought-provoking ambiguities.

From its publication, while the author of "The Rose and the Silver Key" remained practically unknown, the story itself was recognised by a number of reviewers as one of the strongest of the thirty stories in Yeo's original collection. Most tellingly, Malcolm M. Mercer, writing in the year the anthology was published, and the year Nalpon died, pointed out that,

Poignancy is... reflected in *The Rose and the Silver Key* by Gregory Nalpon in which both the tenderness of the story and the simplicity of the story-telling are especially appealing. (It is unfortunate that the editor has seen fit

² When the 1989 edition of *Singapore Short Stories* was scheduled for republication by Longman Pearson in 2000, Nalpon's widow declined permission for the story to be republished. It was therefore omitted and replaced with Gopal Baratham's "Welcome," which had originally been included in volume II of the 1978 edition.

not to include a brief curriculum vitae of Gregory Nalpon, to my mind one of the most stimulating of all the authors in this collection). (Mercer 56)³

The review certainly suggests that Nalpon's literary flavour, lyricism, but also tenderness, simplicity and inspiring story-telling were recognised from the outset. It also suggests that Nalpon was recognised as one of the most accomplished of the 12 short story writers included in the collection.⁴ Three years later, in a 1981 review of *Singapore Short Stories*, an anonymous reviewer noted that,

[w]orks like Chandran Nair's highly poetic 'Leta' and Gregory Nalpon's 'The Rose and the Silver Key' are strongly reminiscent of fairy tales, exuding the bittersweet essence of an evening in the tropics. They will please readers seeking literary flavor and lyricism. (Rev. of *Singapore Short Stories* 12)

Nalpon died suddenly at just 40 shortly after the publication of Yeo's collection. But had Nalpon lived, such critical recognition might well have inspired him to publish more of his stories and possibly compile a collection of his own.

Frank Brennan in the most sustained discussion of "The Rose and the Silver Key" heretofore, in his 1990 Singapore GCE student guide to *Singapore Short Stories*, suggests that Nalpon's story resembles less a fairy tale than a bible story: "Although an entertaining story, 'The Rose and the Silver Key' – like Biblical parables – has more than a touch of the allegory about it" (Brennan 67). As we shall see, while "The Rose and the Silver Key" bears similarities to allegories including Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), as with all allegories, considerably more complex readings of the story are imaginable. For instance, the sustained and repeated comparison drawn between Hamid's rose and Fatimah's lips is suggestive of a sensual-spiritual strand, complementing possible moral facets. Brennan, writing for potential O Level examinees in Singapore in the early 1990s, preparing for a primarily factually based GCE examination, while not denying the presence of socially conscious aspects of this story, seemingly posits an uncomplicated, child-

³ Presumably due to a printing error, a biographical entry for Nalpon was left out of the "About the Authors" section that concludes Volume II of the first edition of *Singapore Short Stories*. However, brief biographical details were included in the 1989 one volume edition: "The late Gregory Nalpon had one story published in *Singapore Short Stories* Volume 2 (1978), edited by Robert Yeo. He has numerous other stories which await collection and publication" (121). Yeo's cryptic remarks inspired the present author's attempts to find and recover Nalpon's life and work.

⁴ About 1985, an equally enthusiastic, if slightly less astute *Asiaweek* reviewer of the second edition of *Singapore Short Stories* noted that "While the virtues of [Nalla] Tan's female protagonists are somewhat oblique, those of Hamid, the main character of Gregory Nalpon's story 'The Rose and the Silver Key,' are simple and straightforward" ("Literary Review" 312). In the following discussion of Nalpon's story, I will suggest that Hamid's "virtues," while striking (even admirable), are significantly more nuanced and problematic than this reviewer suggests.

friendly moral to "The Rose and the Silver Key": "The story tells us that hope can be found in the most unlikely of places and that compassion should not be reserved only for the worthy" (Brennan 67). Yet Nalpon's multilayered story is more complex than Brennan suggests, its message (if it has one) more ambiguous. As the symbolism in the story is both so equivocal and consistently present I will begin by briefly summarising the plot of "The Rose and the Silver Key."

After several paragraphs describing a forgotten yet tellingly fertile Dhoby Ghaut rubbish heap upon which a cast away rose cutting thrives and blooms, Hamid, a Pakistani sarabat stall owner working nearby, is introduced.⁵ A deliberately friendless, almost silent foreigner, but also "a man of pride, strength, silence and compassion" (Yeo, 1978, I, 7), Hamid has remained working in the same location in Singapore for 11 years. Though Hamid sends money home to his family he has never returned to visit them, instead he remains serving drinks and cakes to his principally male, marginalised customers: "[s]oft-eyed boys, bums, men grown tired of wives' talk." "No beggar or thirsty schoolboy with only a bus fare in his pocket, or those who hunted vainly for a job without success" (Yeo, 1978, I, 7) are expected to pay at Hamid's stall. From the outset there is a sense of the labouring class "alien" Hamid as, undemonstratively, both harbourer and protector of the local needy and vulnerable.⁶ The "benches of Hamid's stall" (Yeo, 1978, I, 7), seemingly open for 24 hours, are a predominantly homosocial environment, and a refuge for married men from wives (60). The only female patron is Fatimah; she is permitted to occupy this space by night by virtue of her profession of bar girl cum prostitute.

Hamid's obvious strength, and presence, means he is no victim to extortion: local gangsters "never presumed upon his toughness. They took it for granted in the same way as you would accept the strength of a tiger's jaw without testing it" (Yeo, 1978, I, 7). Hamid lovingly tends the rose on the rubbish heap which becomes "his love, his child, his God" (Yeo, 1978, I, 8). Fatimah, a striking bar girl and seemingly the sole female patron of Hamid's

⁵ Hamid's stall appears to be positioned opposite the Cathay theatre, during the 1950s a popular local cinema. Sarabat, a hot ginger drink, while regarded as an aspect of an older, lost Singapore, appears to be a corruption of the Persian "sharbat." During the 1950s and early 1960s such stalls were traditionally operated by sellers from overseas, Afghahistan, India, Pakistan (conversation with Zhukifli Choo, September 2011). Thus both the drink and the people who operated such stalls contributed to a rich cultural mix in 1960s Singapore.

⁶ Hamid's location in Dhoby Ghaut seems geographically significant. It is in close proximity to Nalpon's school, Saint Joseph's Institution, at Bras Basah Road. Nalpon's friend, Patrick Zehnder recalls that as schoolboys he and Nalpon used to spend time at coffee shops in the vicinity of Dhoby Ghaut (conversation with author, May 2012). Nalpon would then have presumably taken a bus home from Dhoby Ghaut to his family home at the (then) coastal Jalan Soo Bee, Changi. In his reference to a "thirsty schoolboy with only a bus fare in his pocket," therefore, Nalpon represents his schoolboy self at the time this story is set, c late 1950s?

stall, is also the only person brave enough to tease Hamid about his tenderness for the rose.

Hamid ignores Fatimah's persistent-seductive appeals for his rose, in which she offers him a silver key round her neck that is understood to open the door to her room.⁷ After a speeding car runs over a ginger cat, Hamid unceremoniously throws the seemingly dead animal on the rubbish heap. However, soon afterwards, the cat gets up and walks away, seemingly unharmed. Fatimah, claiming the rose is responsible for the cat's coming back to life, desires the rose even more and unsuccessfully demands it of Hamid, offering herself for free. Verbally abusing Hamid for his refusal, Fatimah leaves for the bar. About midnight the bar closes and Fatimah leaves in a "fancy saloon car" with five young men. When she returns three hours later badly assaulted, Hamid cleans and tends her wounds, giving her all his money and the rose. Sending Fatimah home in a taxi, Hamid discovers her silver key. As he buries the key in the rubbish heap, Hamid notices a fresh rose blooming "Sweet as Fatimah's lips."

Characteristically for Nalpon, the story's narrator resembles both eye witness and omniscient narrator. "The Rose and the Silver Key" begins, "There used to be a rubbish heap under the great tree in Dhoby Ghaut with a sarabat stall parked next to it" (Yeo, 1978, I, 6). As Brennan suggests, both the title and beginning of Nalpon's story gesture to traditional, allegorical forms of storytelling, such as folk-fairy tale or parable, thereby perhaps conveying either a moral or a more ambiguous meaning. Nevertheless, the ostensible setting of "The Rose and the Silver Key" is a recognisable, precise Singaporean location and moment. The reference to gangsters and "those times of pin machines and juke-boxes and the Tony Curtis hairstyle" (6) indicates a recent, but, by the mid-seventies, a comparatively more chaotic and vibrant past: about 1959-60, the years immediately preceding Singapore's Independence, entering and then leaving the Federation of Malaysia, and the formation of the Republic of Singapore, and a mere decade or so before Nalpon wrote the story. Yet if at the time of writing "The Rose and the Silver Key," the late 1950s were chronologically proximate, they also represented, after almost two decades of government-generated "development," an increasingly lost and irrecoverable past. "The Rose and the Silver Key," if an allegory, operates within and recalls a recent, lost past and therefore bears witness to subsequent rapid, profound and ongoing change in Singapore. Nalpon's beginning a story describing the recent past with "There used to be," suggests that part of that change includes the expunging of former landmarks as the "great tree" at Dhoby Ghaut, together

⁷ Nalpon deploys the silver key here as a euphemism, a mediated way of suggesting Fatimah herself is an expensive commodity: the price of 25 dollars, c. 1955-60 suggests that her customers will not be found among Hamid's humble patrons, but among the young, fancy saloon car owning patrons of the bar across the road.

with unlicensed roadside, moveable sarabat stalls and local rubbish heaps. That Singapore's recent topography and folkways could, by the mid-1970s be represented as already so remote, means that from the outset, in its very setting, "The Rose and the Silver Key" is uniquely invested with a sense of the unfamiliar and the unreal associated with fairy tales.

But while Singapore of the recent past is represented as an unregulated locale of itinerate roadside sarabat stalls, trees and neighbourhood rubbish heaps, it is also already changing. Nalpon's reference to an age of "gangsters" but more particularly "pin machines and jukeboxes and the Tony Curtis hairstyle" can also be read as an indicator of a globalised Western modernity now derived principally from the USA (as opposed to Singapore's recent colonial administrator, Great Britain) influencing Singapore's youth culture, and society more generally about 1960. On 3 May 1957, a year after Nalpon left SJI, the *Straits Times* reported that "St Joseph's Institution has banned the Tony Curtis hair style [sic]... considered a gangster vogue" ("Ultimatum to Curtis Boys: Cut – or Quit" 4).⁸ Here Hollywood and local gangster culture are connected through Tony Curtis' hair. The "group of five young men" from the bar and the "fancy saloon car" (Yeo, 1978, I, 11) are also suggestive of an association between youth, masculinity, wealth, as well as exploitation and abuse of local bar girls.

"At about twenty to twelve," Hamid sees, "hordes of people pour[ing] out of the Cathay theatre after the late show. No one stopped for a drink at Hamid's stall. They were all rushing for the last bus home" (Yeo, 1978, I, 11).⁹ The Cathay theatre had opened in 1939, becoming a modern democratised public social space at the heart of Singapore city, as the more open, unregulated and locationally fluid sarabat stalls had been earlier in Singapore's history. Nalpon, an avid filmgoer throughout the 1950s to the 1970s, and one time film critic for radio Malaya, seems to represent cinema in a more ambiguous light in this story.¹⁰ The popularity of such large cinemas again suggests the prevalence of a new (American) form of postwar western colonialism. Fatimah works in a

⁸ There was anxiety in late 1950s Singapore concerning the influence of Curtis' performances in films such as "Johnny Dark" on young men of the period. Donatello in another Nalpon story, "The Courtship of Donatello Varga," who unsuccessfully mimics the American style and "jive talk" of pop singer and actor Fabian, is also friends with Harun, the Malay head of a gang. The 1950s manifestation of teddy boys in Singapore perhaps represents the last mass expressions of a distinctive and subversive youth culture in Singapore.

⁹ The significance of Nalpon's use of "hordes" in describing Singapore's cinema-going public carries connotations of unruly nomadic armies, gangs or animals (see *Oxford English Dictionary*).

¹⁰ Nalpon's favourite films of the period included "Cungaceiro" (1953), "The Desert Song" (1953), "Friendly Persuasion" (1956), "The Vagabond King" (1956) "Gigi" (1958) and "Zorba the Greek" (1964) (information from Jacinta Nalpon and Bridget Egbuna). His favourite actors included Victor Mature, Susan Hayward, Danny Kay, Tyrone Power, Ricardo Montalban, Budd Abbot and Lou Costello and The Three Stooges. His own family name "Maurice" derives from the film actor Maurice Chevalier.

“bar” – perhaps also suggesting American cultural influence. Is Nalpon suggesting that such American modernity (Tony Curtis, cinemas, fast saloon cars, gangsters, bars) contributes in some sense to Fatimah’s rape? Hamid’s stall, simultaneously facing both the bar and the Cathay cinema, physically represents a juxtaposition, perhaps even a confrontation, between two times, cultures and values.¹¹

Brennan suggests that “the cinema patrons rushing home remind us that sarabat stall vendors, like many aspects of old Singapore, are being left behind by modern life” (70). But Nalpon’s focus here is predominantly on the crowds. In their leisure the late colonial Singaporean “hordes” are portrayed as travelling by public transport to a central public space watching a western, technologically produced, pre-prepared and programmed entertainment before quickly taking transportation home, discarding older, “slower” but more interactive Singaporean forms of social activity such as patronising and socialising at Hamid’s sarabat stall, now the preserve of lonely, poor and marginalised males. Brennan’s reading is also complicated by Nalpon’s own regular patronage of both the Cathay cinema and “old” places like Hamid’s sarabat stall. Yet while Nalpon’s attitude to the changes Singapore was experiencing c. 1960 seems ambiguous, “The Rose and the Silver Key” stubbornly privileges a local, fast disappearing milieu. One might reflect if Nalpon praises the fertility and richness of places comprising of old forgotten rubbish heaps, sarabat stalls and great trees, what is he suggesting of locations in which these things are absent, or have had those things intentionally expunged? In this light the story reads as a critique on “developed” Singapore’s sterility, c. 1978 and incapacity for genuine renewal.

Brennan is surely right to suggest that the rubbish heap mentioned at the beginning of the story, represents a place of fertility and new life (68). Yet in another sense it represents “community or the history that produces and grounds community” (Lim 176). Both the great tree and the rubbish heap gesture to the hidden, enduring richness of the past at the heart of Singapore city. But the specific urban space and name of “Dhoby Ghaut,” literally meaning “laundry on the steps along the banks of a river,” also possesses historical connotations of migrants from the Indian subcontinent, as well as washing and cleansing (see Savage and Yeoh 110). From the 1830s Bengali and Madrasi laundrymen washed and dried clothes here (see Savage and Yeoh 110). Yet that rich sense of past and history seems already contested, marginalised, even lost, amidst Fatimah’s bar, the cinema at Cathay and their foreign-American-colonial implications, aspects of the “juggernaut of modernisation” (Ng 125) by the late 1950s.

¹¹ We can roughly place Hamid’s sarabat stall at Dhoby Ghaut within sight of the Cathay Theatre, on the North side of Handy Road, thus between Cathay Building and the location of the nearest bus stops, c. 1960, i.e. the South Eastern end of Orchard Road.

The locality of the fertile rubbish heap and sarabat stall then represents c. 1960 Singapore's, marginalised, endangered and soon to be swept away, past. But it also represents an oasis for its vulnerable, tired and financially limited clientele from the hardships, gangsters and violence of pre-Independence Singapore. While Hamid "tall and lean and very tough" (6) silently but forcefully keeps such forces at bay by his very presence, Fatimah ultimately falls foul of them. Nalpon's reference to "the great tree at Dhoby Ghaut" (6) implies a specific, well known spot, if not locatable on maps, known by local inhabitants and visitors.¹² The old, disused, forgotten rubbish heap stands for a discarded past becoming fertile through its continuous use and reuse over a considerable period of time. Local people, aware of its potency, take away "potfuls of it to plant flowers in" (6). The heap's fertility provides a clue to it also being represented as a location of, and possibly a cause of "resurrection" and renewal for a discarded brown rose stem, a run over, seemingly dead cat and a sexually assaulted bar girl respectively.¹³ While the sprouting of the rose stem and the beaten Fatimah's childlike sense of wonder can be explained by natural as opposed to supernatural means, the ginger cat's coming back to life gestures to the potentially marvellous or indeed miraculous transformational qualities of the neighbourhood rubbish heap (see Todorov).

Fatimah

I now wish to focus on Nalpon's portrayal of Fatimah. In an illuminating comment, Brennan describes her as "from an undesirable background, society's rubbish heap" (69). Yet Fatima cannot be dismissed so tritely. Nalpon's story reveals almost nothing about Fatimah's background, aside from her being a bar girl, loud and unregulated in her behaviour. As we shall see, one might deduce that she could be Indian, Malay, or perhaps Indonesian. Nalpon's regular frequenting of local samsu shops, bars and coffee shops from the 1950s to the 1970s suggests he must have met, known and conversed with numerous bar girls like Fatimah. Like John Steinbeck, a writer Nalpon admired (discussion with Nalpon's friend Patrick Zehnder, May 2012; see also the beginning of Nalpon's "A Man Without Song" in *The Wayang at Eight Mile Junction*), who provides positive portrayals of prostitutes, Nalpon avoids judgment of Fatimah or her profession. Yet Fatimah's loud and reckless behaviour at both Hamid's sarabat stall and the bar she works at can be placed in the context of local anxieties about bar girls and the regulation of their work during the late 1950s. In the *Singapore Free Press* of 13 July 1959, in the midst of unannounced spot

¹² This recalls a more recent contested urban "third world space": "Bangla square" in Singapore's Little India. See Wong.

¹³ Nalpon's phrase "such a large red rose on so frail a stem" seems particularly telling (63-64) in its contrast of heady beauty and fragility. Ironically, ultimately it is the frail stem that produces another rose, potentially as perfect as that given to Fatimah.

checks on Singapore's 500 waitresses employed in 170 bars across Singapore, Singapore's Minister of Labour and Law, K.M. Byrne, declared that "girls working in bars were a social problem" ("Details Sought Before Law is Passed" 5). The spot checks also reflected concerns about the welfare of the bar girls. In the same article, a group of bar girls observe, "A large part of our earnings comes from tips. In order to get tips we have to be nice to our customers" ("Details Sought Before Law is Passed" 5). A bar girl employed in Syed Alwi Road asserts, "I think it is right for the Government to control the activities of bar-girls. Many of them are young and do not know the trade well. As a result they may fall prey to customers who are out to have a good time" ("Details Sought Before Law is Passed" 5). The bar girl's euphemism of women "falling prey" to mean "out to have a good time" speaks to Fatimah's vulnerability and the violence ultimately enacted upon her. The story touches retrospectively on a then contemporarily contested issue: are bar girls a social nuisance or victims potentially exploited and abused by both employers and male patrons?¹⁴

Fatimah, as local-indigenous bar girl, seems in a unique position, a woman capable of inhabiting as a visible and dominating presence, both modern and old homosocial Singaporean worlds of sarabat stall and bar during this period of transition.¹⁵ Gender aside, she shares something of Nalpon's own engagement with both old and new Singapore. Fatimah also – in a story created at a time of heightened sensitivity about these issues, less than a decade after violent race riots in Singapore – appears to straddle local race and culture. Like Alice in "The Courtship of Donatello Varga," Fatimah wears *kebaya* and *sarong*, popular female dress in the 1950s and 1960s a few decades before many Malay women began dressing more conservatively and adopting the *tudong*.¹⁶ Fatimah also does not work on a Friday, the Muslim holy day of the week. Such details could suggest Fatimah is Malay, perhaps Indonesian. Yet her bangles could also imply she might be Indian and Muslim. Fatimah's ethnic ambiguity recalls that of Tok Said and Sally Salmah (also a prostitute and ultimately victim of gang rape) in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976). In Nalpon's stories, while male characters like Hamid and Samuel Paul in "A Soul for Alice Lim" seem more ethnically identified, seemingly more local-indigenous female characters like

¹⁴ It would be interesting to know if this was an issue Nalpon encountered and addressed in his legal work for the Singapore Manual and Mercantile Workers Union, c. 1957-74.

¹⁵ Fatimah, in Arabic, means "one who weans or abstains." It was the name of Muhammad's eldest daughter, a revered figure for Muslims, and thus remains a very popular name amongst Muslims. The name also contains Roman Catholic connotations: Fatimah, Portugal is a place of pilgrimage linked to early twentieth century visions of the Virgin Mary experienced by a group of local peasant children, c. 1917. One of whom was named Jacinta, the name of Nalpon's daughter. The fact that Jacinta Nalpon was named after this twentieth century, yet to be canonised "saint," attests to Nalpon moving in a local culture where superstition, myth and miracle remain very much alive. In an earlier version of the story Fatimah is named "Maria" (see Nalpon).

¹⁶ For this story see *The Wayang at Eight Milestone* (forthcoming).

Fatimah and Alice in "The Courtship of Donatello Varga," occupy a significantly more liminal space. One wonders if in his representation of Fatimah, and in the fusion of traditional Hindu-Catholic symbolism in his representation of the rose, shortly to be discussed, Nalpon, like his Malaysian contemporaries, K.S. Manian and Lee Kok Liang,

harnesses the symbols of... religious traditions to rethink their ethnic and cultural particularity and how their narratives negotiate 'categories of difference and power [to] indicate the degree to which ethnic traditions resist the homogenizing and functionalist strategies' of nationalism and historical imperatives. (Ng 23, citing Peter Kerry Powers)

Fatimah is introduced as being "very pretty" and "desirable" with "long hair and wide eyes and lips like two petals of Hamid's rose. The sight of her figure in clinging kebaya and sarong always incited blushes on the cheeks of sober men." In addition, Fatimah isn't "shy at all. She'd shout across the road at anyone she knew. She created many fights in the Bar across the road. She caused them by just smiling at more than one person at the same time" (Yeo, 1989, 8). Fatimah's physical allure and unregulated behaviour are already associated with masculine violence. That she causes bar fights by "smiling at more than one person at the same time" initially suggests a confident and deliberate deployment of her sexuality. Yet Fatimah's complex, ambiguous appeal also extends to kind men as well as violent ones. She can also,

display a small hint of inconsolable regret for her way of life which made kind men imagine that they shared her company merely to relieve her of a weight of sin. As a result, Fatimah had collected a tidy sum in the post-office. (Yeo, 1989, 8)

Is Fatimah's "hint of inconsolable regret" a performance for commercial advantage, an expression of genuine sorrow, or something in between? The denouement of the story might suggest the latter.¹⁷

Fatimah's very presence also makes sober men blush. Interestingly Hamid's first, rose-inspired smile at her makes Fatimah "forget herself" and blush, looking for an instant "like a young girl upon whom a man's eyes had rested for the first time" (8-9). The sentence problematises Brennan's implicit suggestion that Fatimah represents society's unworthy: Fatimah's loud behaviour and her brash and sexy public persona are part of a consciously

¹⁷ The description of her effect on two kinds of men, a) violent and b) sober, kind ones, at the beginning of the story foreshadows their respective treatment of her at the end of the story. While Fatimah is able to exercise sexual and persuasive power over sober, financially limited and kind men respectively, she ultimately falls foul of five leisured and minted young men who seem neither sober nor kind.

assumed and calculated performance/survival mechanism in the male environments in which she inhabits as bar girl/prostitute/commodity. That performance is interrupted twice in the story: when Hamid first smiles at Fatimah, and when she walks back to Hamid's stall after the assault. As Hamid alone tends her and presents her with the rose there is no attempt to reassume her act. We cannot therefore simply give the loud and proud Fatimah's humbling through sexual assault a simplistic, misogynistic moral of female display and pride coming before a fall. Fatimah is surprised by what the five young men do to her: "Her eyes were dull with the shock of how the young men had treated her" (12). The sentence is suggestive of unexpected, unprecedented violence perhaps connected to modernity. Fatimah's assault has less to do with her pride, foolishness, than a Hollywood influenced, unregulated modernity and perhaps influenced by a racial majority's perceptions of her in terms of race and gender.

Symbolism: Rose, Rubbish Heap, Ginger Cat, Silver Key

Both accounts surrounding Fatimah's silver key and the "resurrection" of the ginger cat veer between urban legend and verifiable history, and can be considered stories (oral traditions) within stories. Thus there is a sense in which fact, gossip, folk and fairy tale merge in this story. The rumour-story about Fatimah's silver key, initially euphemistically suggests that Fatimah, a bar girl is also operating as a prostitute: "A key hung from a chain around her sweet neck. The key was made of real silver. Rumour was that she hired out the key for \$25 a time. It opened the door to her room" (8). The "urban myth" is confirmed later in the story when Fatimah, her desperate need for the rose reaching crisis point after the ginger cat incident, offers her key to Hamid at an ever decreasing price: "My Hamid, I must have that rose now... I'll even lend you my key free of charge!" (10). But the ginger cat incident remains caught between hearsay and verifiability. As Fatimah's aggressive demands and temptation of Hamid reach crisis-point, the ginger cat is hit by a speeding car.¹⁸ The incident is framed in a characteristically ambiguous sentence from Nalpon, reminiscent of Arthur Yap's short stories: "What happened next was accepted as an inexplicable omen by many people" (9). Yet this popular agnostic-interpretation of the cat incident is challenged and silenced (at least in her presence) by Fatimah's overbearingly unequivocal assertion that a resurrection-esque miracle has occurred: "'It must be Hamid's rose that returned it to life. That rose must possess remarkable qualities.' No one disputed her statement. It wasn't worth the storm of abuse that would pour from her divine lips any time anyone contradicted her" (10).

¹⁸ Interestingly, the car does not stop. The "frozen snarl" of the seemingly dead cat recalls Tony's "mouth, snarling even in death" at the conclusion of Nalpon's story "Eye for an Eye."

The first two paragraphs of the "The Rose and the Silver Key" maintain a sustained focus on the rubbish heap and the rose. The rubbish heap is initially represented as a site of fertility via a transformation of the discarded past, but also as a place of a variety of kinds of renewal, "resurrection."¹⁹ Although the customers and Hamid exhibit little interest in interpreting the cat's resurrection, as we have just seen, Fatimah asserts the rose, possessing "remarkable qualities" (10), has brought the ginger cat back to life. Yet, earlier the narrator suggests that the rose's stem, initially a brown rose cutting, "slim as a cheeping chicken's leg" (6), was itself, "secretly... shyly" (the adjectives perhaps suggesting unseen, or often unnoticed processes in life and history?) bought back to life by the rubbish heap. Thus, Fatimah seems mistaken; it is the rubbish heap, rather than the rose that mysteriously resurrects both rose and cat. Is this why Hamid at the end of the story notices a new rose on the stem as he buries Fatimah's abandoned key in the rubbish heap? While initially "people" forget about the rubbish heap, later "people in the area" take away and use the "warm and rich and fertile" soil generated by the heap "to plant flowers in." Both the past and the local are therefore represented as containing potentialities for enrichment and renewal. The rubbish heap then is connotative of often unappreciated but potentially regenerative qualities of Singapore's unappreciated local past and traditions.

The rose is of course a rich symbol, not least in love poetry, and Sufism and Catholicism (connotative of the virgin Mary, the wounds of Christ and the martyrs). In classical literature it is associated with the Egyptian Isis, a goddess worshipped as the ideal mother and wife as well as the patroness of nature and magic, and the Greek-Roman goddess of love, Venus (or Aphrodite). The rose also contains connotations of secrecy: for example in the legal term, "sub rosa," literally "under the rose." According to Jacinta and Zero Nalpon, one of Gregory Nalpon's favourite songs, and one that he used to sing frequently to his wife Mona, was Mario Lanza's "Only a Rose." A line from the chorus of the song seems particularly pertinent in the context of this story: "I'll bring along a smile or a song for anyone/ Only a rose for you."²⁰

The stem from which the red rose blooms from is described as having "nine leaves and fourteen thorns" (59). Again, Nalpon seems suspiciously precise in his use of numbers here. While the nine leaves of the rose seem to tellingly gesture to *nava patrika*, the Hindu rite of fertility and regeneration, the fourteen thorns appear to have Roman Catholic connotations. According to some accounts of the life of St Theresa, founder of the Carmelite order, after her death, fourteen thorns are said to have grown from the saint's heart (see

¹⁹ Interestingly, Micah is told by God that "I will make Samaria a rubbish heap, a field for the plantings of a vineyard" (Micah 1:6). King James Version.

²⁰ Mario Lanza, "Only a Rose" (RCA, 1210, 1960). Nalpon also quoted the lyric on an undated (c. 1965) postcard to his mother from Malaysia. Photocopy kindly sent to me by Bridget Egbuna.

Coleman 128). Nalpon, descended from Catholics from Pondicheary, therefore here seems to be deploying a kind of syncretism, fusing and reworking Hindu and Catholic traditions (both of which could be argued to be very much part of Nalpon's past cultural heritage) in telling a story of the Muslim Hamid and Fatimah and a Dhoby Ghaut rubbish heap rose.

One might reflect on the connotations of the rose beginning to bloom on the dustheap, changing and humanising the previously cold, military, lizard eyed Hamid (61). Hamid's life is clearly enhanced by the rose. His initial "inspect[ion]" of the rose, like his moustache carries military connotations. But later Hamid just "admire[s]" (63) his rose. His watering and caring for rose regularly becomes a kind of ritual providing enhanced meaning to his life. At the same time, descriptions of the rose seem to gesture to both Fatimah and her way of life. At the beginning of the story, an ambiguously framed contrast is made between the large headed rose and the frail stem: "A large red rose bending its stem almost level with the rubbish heap" (59). Just before Hamid sees Fatimah re-entering the Bar the rose's petals seem "filled with deep red juices" (63). As Hamid admires the rose, in the hours after Fatimah has left with the five men, the narrator's comment (which could mirror Hamid's thoughts) both suggest and foreshadow Fatimah's abuse: "Such a large red rose on so frail a stem" (63-64). While sensual in connotation, the image also foreshadows Fatimah's bloodied lips. Indeed Hamid's gaze and thoughts seem to move repeatedly in a direction from rose to Fatimah connecting both closely in our minds. Ultimately, the rose is attained from Hamid by Fatimah neither through persuasion or sexual allure but through Fatimah's suffering, Hamid's pity.

Ginger Cat

The ginger cat is less yielding of connotations and symbolism. The presence of a ginger cat at a sarabat (ginger drink) may be mere coincidence. Yet its "resurrection" is both dramatic and puzzling. The tradition that to dream of a ginger cat is meant to denote success in business or money seems unhelpful in this context. However, in a presumably earlier Nalpon Story, just discussed, "A Soul for Anna Lim," while another prostitute, Anna, has a frightening dream-supernatural encounter, her orange cat, who assists her choice of numbers for Singapore's 4-D lottery, is disemboweled. In both stories the cat's fate respectively foreshadows or informs the fate of Fatimah and Anna.²¹

Silver Key

What of the significance of the silver key? The fact that it is silver has connotations of the feminine and the nocturnal. Silver keys are traditionally

²¹ In fact in another story, a bar girl (prostitute?) is also foregrounded and ultimately redeemed: Alice in "The Courtship of Donatello Varga."

symbolic of privileged access to "higher" spaces. Silver keys as gifts also contain traditional associations with birth, coming of age and wedding. One of the keys of St. Peter is silver. Fairy stories such as Grimm's "The Golden Key," and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Gate Key" feature silver keys. But while the silver key is a resonant symbol, such connotations seem to have limited resonance in Nalpon's story. For Brennan it is the "key to [Fatimah's] soul" (69) presumably following on from (or a misreading of) the rumour that it is the key to her room, and by implication, her body. Fatimah's dropping and Hamid's burying of the key will be explored below.

Hamid

Brennan suggests that Hamid's loving care for the rose is "the point at which the allegorical elements of the story become more evident" (69). This reading seems to echo Yeo's observation that Nalpon's stories begin in the recognisably local-empirical and progress into the allegorical-supernatural (Yeo, 1978, Vol. I, xiii). Brennan is perhaps overstating the case in suggesting that Hamid is "like some kind of holy man" (69); and that he "represents spiritual values that cannot be tainted by man" (71). Nevertheless, Hamid does "worship God without naming him" and "[finds] comfort in" a rose described as "his love, his child, his god."²² Brennan also suggests that, "Hamid's generosity is rather like that of the father in the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son, who still looks after and loves his son despite his son's earlier sins" (70). But one might detect a closer source to and parallel with Nalpon's story in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37). The Pakistani Hamid, like the Samaritan, while alien, non-Singaporean, is represented as ultimately selfless and compassionate. While Hamid habitually affords shelter and refreshment gratis for destitute patrons, he ultimately gives Fatimah all the money he has from his poorly patronised stall, recalling another gospel passage, that of the poor old widow (Mark 12: 41-4).

But can "The Rose and the Silver Key" be merely a modern retelling of the good Samaritan? There is an ambiguity, and perhaps a hint of sensuality about Hamid's response to Fatimah and her flirtation and demand for the rose. While Hamid appears to express ("snort") disgust in response to Fatimah's public display of advances, he also seems preoccupied with (vainly) twirling his military moustache and his "lizard's eyes" shine (6). His teeth are also stained with betel nut. Such details as Hamid's "eyes gleaming with the light of lizard eyes" seem to suggest a less unequivocally "holy" side to Hamid. Such details recall a character like Samuel Paul in "A Soul for Alice Lim," a cross between a wandering ascetic and *bon vivant*. Whereas Hamid seems more ascetic than

²² Hamid's regularly pouring water for the rose from and through his fingers seems suggestive of a religious rite.

Samuel, he nevertheless relishes life, his simple food the rose and (as his gaze constantly wanders from rose to Fatimah) possibly Fatimah.

Interestingly, in the first half of the story, Nalpon's narrator continually digresses, and "freezes" the story in order to provide detailed accounts of the rubbish heap, the tree, Hamid and Fatimah. Nalpon also deftly juxtaposes relative time: changing Singapore rushes past sedentary Hamid's stall.

Hamid's satisfaction derives from simple things, eating modestly and tending his rose. Hamid relishes the rice and dhal gravy bought by a boy from nearby Bencoolen Street, another specifically named local space,²³ and, after eating, "belche[s] satisfyingly" (10).²⁴ If, as Catherine Bell suggests, ritual is a "way to remain human in an increasingly dehumanized world" (Bell 271), Hamid's regulated caring for, loving of and pleasure in the rose (as if it were human, a god, an object of devotion) also provides structure and meaning in his life in the face of Singapore's increasing modernity, and more generally seems emblematic of Singaporean engagements with, and coping mechanisms in the face of, modernity.

Hamid's separation (no friends), silence and reserve (no speech) also seem strategies to maintain ethnic identity and keep modernity at bay. While foreign and poor, Hamid is respected by his customers, even Fatimah "behave[s] herself" (8) in his presence. That we never hear Hamid directly speak contrasts strongly with Fatimah's outspoken behaviour. Hamid is characterised by implicitly, instinctively expressed physical and spiritual strength: his "pride, strength, silence and compassion" (7) are sympathetically alluded to by the narrator. Hamid's qualities are thus overtly named, and positively so, but there is also a sense that Hamid is: a) independent of and distancing himself from modern world while living in it, b) is connected to the past (via the rubbish heap), and beauty (via the rose), and c) creating and conducting his own rituals as mechanisms to help him and those that seek his hospitality and protection to cope in an increasingly technologically advanced, but spiritually toxic milieu.

Hamid's silence and power makes his gentle and intimate kindnesses to Fatimah at the end of the story all the more telling. Yet if Hamid, alone, is described as "content" (11), one might wonder why his gaze consistently travels from the rose to Fatimah, whenever she is present. For instance, Hamid, after gazing at the rose, smiles at Fatimah. The smile takes Fatimah off guard, causing her to blush, and making her momentarily resemble the rose. It takes Fatimah's being assaulted, for Fatimah to abandon any pretense, and for Hamid to shift from his usual snorting dismissal of her (mock) advances to an actual expression of selfless pity and generosity. Unlike Sabran in Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, whose offer of help is rejected by the raped Sally, Hamid, never a

²³ The street name contains connotations of Raffles, Sumatra, as well as the existence of kampong Bencoolen.

"paying customer" of Fatimah, is in a legitimate position, to help Fatimah. Hamid, like Samuel, is a poor man redeeming physically or psychologically-spiritually suffering/damaged prostitutes through simple kindness and magic derived from lowly sources (a rose from a rubbish heap, a caged pearl supposedly from a boar's tusk).²⁵ Hamid's quiet, unaffected, practical kindnesses culminate in his presenting Fatimah with the rose, causing Fatimah to feel "a strange sense of childlike wonder and pain" (Yeo, 1989, 65): "He placed it in her hair and Fatimah wept again because she could not bear the pain of the sweetness of Hamid's rose" (Yeo, 1989, 12).

Hamid draws out from his till "all the money he had" (Yeo, 1989, 12). Here Nalpon appears to echo Jesus' remark on the poor widow who "gave all she had": "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12: 41-44). As in the case of the poor widow, the money in Hamid's till, derived from his poorly patronised sarabat stall must be negligible, paying for little more than Fatimah's taxi home. Hamid, with characteristically un sentimental, practical kindness, "shove[s]" the money into Fatimah's purse.

When Hamid later discovers Fatimah's silver key under her seat it is unclear whether it has been secretly, deliberately left for and therefore given to Hamid,²⁶ or conversely accidentally fallen from Fatimah's neck. If the latter, its falling from Fatimah's neck, perhaps recalling the albatross falling from the neck of the mariner in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," carries connotations of a weight/burden of sin/unhappiness falling from her. Hamid's burying of Fatimah's key in the rubbish heap is also ambiguous. Is the burial suggestive of a death of Fatimah's former life? Conversely, by burying the key in the forgotten, disused but fertile rubbish heap, is Hamid consigning Fatimah's key and former life to a rich and potentially regenerative past? As Hamid buries the key, he notices a budding new bloom on the rose bush. Again the detail is unexplained, suggestive (of a new life from a kind of death?), but ultimately ambiguous. Is the re-blooming stem linked to Hamid's giving of the rose, or the burial of the key? Fatimah's craving for and willingness to sell herself for the rose bloom, now seems ironic, misplaced, when it can be so quickly replaced by a new one. Has Fatimah mistakenly privileged the heavy but transient red rose over the seemingly frail but life giving stem? Has she like modern Singaporeans mistaken superficial appearance for reality? Yet while Hamid loved and admired the rose (bloom) he tended the plant's stem carefully.

Such a reading is troubled by the story's final sentences: "And as he buried the silver key under the rose stem of the rubbish heap, he noticed that a

²⁵ Donatello does the same for Alice in a far less dramatic way in "The Courtship of Donatello Varga."

²⁶ If this is the case, what are the implications of Fatimah's leaving her key for Hamid?

new bud was opening into red petals. Soft as Fatimah's lips" (12). These are the narrator's words, but again, there is the implication that these are Hamid's thoughts, which like his gaze travel from rose to Fatimah. A seemingly "moral" story/fable/allegory ends on a sensual note where the rose is compared to Fatimah's now absent lips. The last sentence also seems suggestive of the rose and Fatimah's shared beauty, fragility; but also renewal. The gang beaten and raped Fatimah remains as beautiful as the budding rose. Hamid's seemingly puritan disgust at Fatimah's suggestive behaviour toward him is thus ultimately by his selfless, non-judgmental and practical kindnesses to her in difficulty – the handkerchief in her kebaya to protect her modesty.

Only Fatimah positively articulates a supernatural possibility in the cat's getting up. As no one dares or bothers to contradict her, Fatimah's remains (at least publicly) the dominant discourse. Yet in reality the patrons of Hamid's stall: "accept" the cat's resurrection or survival "as an inexplicable omen" (9).²⁷ But what is an inexplicable omen? The patrons' interpretation is really an acceptance of the unknowable, unexplainable, recalling the villagers at the beginning of Nalpon's "The Mango Tree":

People who live far away from towns seem born with understanding and respect for all things around them. They do not wonder how things came to be or why. Because they know of these matters. They inherit explanations for the existence of each and everything. They recognise the existence of natural and supernatural forces. (Nalpon, *The Wayang at Eight Milestone*)

Whatever has happened to the cat is never rationally explained. Fatimah's interpretation undisputed to keep the peace is unsound: the "dead" cat does touch the rose, but lands in a corner of the rubbish heap. As with Singapore's past, a brown rose cutting, both the ginger cat and Fatimah's silver key are transformed by their contact with a rich levelling local history.

Hamid and Fatimah, as with many of Nalpon's characters, while partially recognisable cultural types and races, attempt to create new, personal, mythologies. At the same time, Nalpon simultaneously represents the recognisable quotidian local street life of Singapore, mythologising it. Nalpon while not writing from or about specific ethnic community is also privileging a local, pre-modern past over a national, modern present. Both Hamid's stall and Fatimah represent an unregulated, dangerous, for many undesirable but nevertheless also alive present all too soon to be reformed, regulated, expunged.

²⁷ Interestingly, this interpretation prefigures and frames the incident.

Form

The form of "The Rose and the Silver Key," already partially discussed, bears further analysis. There is an intimate gossipy quality to the story, almost the sense of being told a story by a friend, elder, extempore, off the cuff, initially distracting the reader from its careful structuring and framing. As is usual in the majority of Nalpon's stories, it is set in the third person, with a narrator (seemingly both omniscient and eyewitness) telling the story, yet continually digressing, breaking off almost in mid-sentence, for example in telling us about Fatimah. The stall, according to the narrator, is very ordinary, "no different from any of the hundreds of other sarabat stalls in Singapore" (6-7). But we then encounter a meticulously detailed description of it. As if the recently common sarabat stall with "canvas roof, spoked wheels, aluminium counter (easy to wipe clean with a damp cloth), brass urn with compartments for hot coffee, tea and sarabat, the urn pierced by a funnel in which charcoal embers constantly glowed, and three taps attached to the urn" (7) had already vanished, only to be conserved through careful cataloguing. Other sustained descriptions privilege a quotidian minutiae from which humans (aside from Hamid) are absent, "stray dogs investigated dustbins and starlings twittered and wheeled amongst the rooftops" (11).

Nalpon's stories are set in the humblest everyday contexts and contain close detailed observation coupled with the fanciful, with their potentially symbolic, supernatural meanings partially "unravelling." In these ways, they seem reminiscent of his admired Steinbeck, Hemingway, Nikos Kazantzakis²⁸ and Jose Ruben Romero's picaresque novel *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (published in 1938, the year of Nalpon's birth). Rather than necessarily introducing the supernatural – an untypical feature of early Singaporean short stories written before 1977 – Nalpon seems to be experimenting with possibilities and perceptions of reality.²⁹

More interestingly, "The Rose and the Silver Key," like several other stories by Nalpon engages with Singapore's recent past: the minute particulars of urban culture during the late colonial/pre-Independence era (c. 1955-1962), on the cusp of radical economic and technological revolution. In this story, as elsewhere, Nalpon, informed by his employment by The Singapore Manual and Mercantile Workers' Union during a period of profound legislative change, also consistently foregrounds the marginalised caught in the midst of these changes.

²⁸ Author of "Zorba the Greek" (1946), the 1964 film of which Nalpon watched repeatedly (Jacinta Nalpon, conversation, September 2011).

²⁹ Nevertheless, Nalpon certainly seems to be drawing upon the fact that even in modern Singapore, the supernatural seems to be an aspect of reality of life in Singapore where Malay Indonesian and Chinese superstitions remain alive and well in the high tech metropolis.

Conclusion

Nalpon is refreshingly dissimilar from other writers in Yeo's original 1978 collection. A natural story teller, Nalpon confidently deploys both simple, accessible and unpretentious language and a telling ambiguity and depth. Nalpon is also one of the few short story writers, Kon aside, to capture and represent convincingly life on the street. Many of his contemporaries seem swayed by English; their ambitious and self-consciously use of 'English' English is often awkward. Nalpon, by contrast, drawing on a wider reading, including American, South American, and European, writers, as well as his breadth of experience of life in Singapore, seems a more cosmopolitan and aesthetically, convincing, Singaporean writer. Nalpon was writing in considerably more 'left wing' and more overtly socially conscious era, while in the midst of unprecedented sweeping change driven by an authoritarian government. In that sense he seems, perhaps still, a peculiarly Singaporean writer ahead of his time.

"The Rose and the Silver Key" is a fairy story/folk tale set in a very tangible, proximate time and setting. At the same time, Nalpon's rehearsing of still relevant issues (e.g. immigration, prostitution) in a recent but already defamiliarised "past," gestures to mediated, but significant, social criticism in a time of censorship under an authoritarian government sensitive to satire or criticism. In Nalpon's most accomplished short story, a Pakistani drinks seller and an indigenous bar girl both from marginalised by race and poverty take centre-stage in a story set at the heart of Singapore city.

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