

Isa Kamari's "Singapore Trilogy"

Harry Aveling¹

La Trobe and Monash Universities, Australia

Isa Kamari, *1819*. Trans. R. Krishnan. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013. 243pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-42-4.

Isa Kamari, *Rawa*. Trans. R. Krishnan. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013. 172pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-43-1.

Isa Kamari, *A Song of the Wind*. Trans. Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013. 252pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-44-8.

Isa Kamari is a major Singapore Malay author. Born in 1960 in Kampung Tawakal, his family moved to a Housing Development Board (HDB) apartment in Ang Mo Kio while he was still in his teens. After studying at the elite Raffles Institution, he went on to take the degree of Bachelor of Architecture (with Honours) from the National University of Singapore in 1988 and now holds a senior position with the Land Transport Authority. Isa has also earned a Master of Philosophy degree in Malay Letters from the National University of Malaysia, 2007. He is a prolific writer and has so far published two volumes of short stories, eight novels, six volumes of poetry, one collection of stage plays and several albums of contemporary spiritual music. Isa's literary work has been widely honoured: he received the SEA Write Award in 2006, the Singapore government's Cultural Medallion in 2007 and the Singapore Malay literary award Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang in 2009. He is married to Dr. Sukmawati Sirat, a graduate of the University of Southern Carolina, and the couple have two daughters. In 2001 he completed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Isa's novels are increasingly being translated from Malay for wider audiences. *Satu Bumi* (One Earth, 1998) was published in Mandarin in 1999 as *Yi Pien Re Tu* and in English in 2008, under the title of *One Earth* (translated by Sukmawati Sirat). Two other novels appeared in English translations in 2009:

¹ Harry Aveling holds Honorary Professorships at La Trobe and Monash Universities, Melbourne. He has earned degrees from the National University of Singapore (PhD in Malay Studies) and the University of Technology, Sydney (Doctor of Creative Arts, DCA, in Literary Translation). His research areas are Indonesian and Malay Literature, and Translation Studies, and he has published widely in these fields.

Intercession (*Tamassul*, 2002, translated by Sukmawati Sirat and edited by Alvin Pang); and *Nadra* (*Atas Nama Cinta*, In the Name of Love, 2006, translated by Sukmawati Sirat and edited by Aaron Lee Soon Yong). In 2013, four translations have been released: *The Tower* (*Menara*, 2002, translated by Alfian Sa'at); *A Song of the Wind* (*Memeluk Gerhana*, Embracing the Eclipse, 2007, "rendered in English from Malay" by Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan); *Rawa* (*Rawa: tragedi Pulau Batu Puteh*, Rawa: The Tragedy of White Rock Island, 2009, "rendered in English from the original Malay" by Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan); and *1819* (*Duka Tuan Bertakhta*, You Rule in Sorrow, 2011, "rendered in English from Malay by Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan").

1819, *Rawa* and *A Song of the Wind* have been published by the same publisher, Silverfish Books, Kuala Lumpur, and packaged as belonging to the genre of "historical fiction" so that they appear to form a natural chronological progression of books "about Singapore." *1819* deals with the foundation of Singapore by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles; *Rawa* describes the changing lives of three generations of the one *orang seletar* (sea gypsy) family, from the 1950s to the 1980s; and *A Song of the Wind*, presents a lively account of a young man's coming of age in a rapidly developing newly independent nation, from the 1960s to the 1990s. The books were, as we have just noted, originally written in the reverse order to this. Nevertheless, for present purposes we shall continue to follow this order as it will be a natural one for English readers who come to the works for the first time.

The approach to history varies with each volume. In *1819*, the great events of international colonial expansion take centre stage. The major characters are the colonialists, the Malay Sultan of Singapore and the Temenggung (chieftain), and two communal leaders, Habib Nuh, a Muslim holy man, and Wak Cantuk, a traditional healer and teacher of the martial arts. The transfer of sovereignty over the island is presented as the result of deviousness and treachery on the part of the British, and stupidity and an addiction to opium on the part of the Malay aristocracy. The community leaders are figures of respect but do not have the necessary skills to help their followers navigate the new political circumstances. Lesser, but extremely lively, characters are the young people: Nuraman, Wak Cantuk's leading *silat* student, Marmah, Wak Cantuk's adopted daughter, and the three "boys" Ramli, Sudin and Ajis. Much of the latter two-thirds of the work is given over to their involvements with Habib Nuh and Wak Cantuk, and the various stories of their own adolescent experiences, their relationships and their love for Marmah. These characters of ordinary Singapore Malays are a strong feature of Isa's writing in general and become increasingly prominent as the Singapore story develops in the other two works.

Rawa is "the name of the land" where the sea gypsies live, between the north coast of Singapore and the mainland of the peninsula, and of the main

character himself. The story describes how Rawa and his family (his daughter, Kuntum, her husband, Lamit, and their son, Hassan) are steadily caught up in the relentless modernisation of the Republic, including their settlement in the confines of an HDB apartment block. Besides the opportunity to live their life in a huge multi-tenanted but anonymous building, modern Singapore offers them the conveniences of “a car, a big television and fridge, air-conditioning in every room, and expensive furniture” (93). It offers the parents steady, although somewhat insecure, work, and it offers the grand-son a good education and the chance to follow a highly regarded profession of naval architect. Yet they no longer have the freedom that the original inhabitants had. With this relentless rationality of human existence, comes a loss of the links with the environment, and indeed with the simplicity and purity of human nature itself. They are also increasingly assimilated into the opaque ethnic category of “Malay.” And the Malay community’s position in Singapore, Isa suggests, is one of severe disadvantage. “The Malays now are not what they used to be,” Rawa muses, watching the television in his daughter’s flat. The newscast confirms his worst fears: “Divorce is highest among Malays. The number of Malay addicts in rehab centres is not decreasing. There is a rise in gangsterism, and births out of wedlock. And there is no shortage of ‘forums’ to address these issues” (93). Both *1819* and *Rawa*, in their different ways, are stories of the difficult transitions of the Malay community in a wider society that is indifferent to their special needs. In *1819*, the community is betrayed by its leaders; in *Rawa*, the community has no clear leaders, only an old man who represents increasingly anachronistic values in the midst of vast and amorphous changes. The task for Malays is to learn to be proud citizens of a complex multi-racial society and to keep “in touch with their essence, the spirit” (94).

A Song of the Wind fits easily into the well-established category of a young man’s growth to maturity in the turbulent setting of a newly independent Singapore, through the experiences of childish playfulness in a narrow domestic setting, formal education, first loves and National Service, as brilliantly developed by Goh Poh Seng in *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) and Robert Yeo’s *The Adventures of Holden Heng* (1986). Isa’s novel can be divided into these same themes: childhood in Kampung Tawakal and Ang Mo Kio, education at Whitley Primary School and Raffles Institution, and National Service in the Police Force. The novel touches on many of the themes of the Malay culture of disadvantage dealt with in *Rawa* and other works by Isa: poverty, economic discrimination, lack of education, drugs, teenage pregnancy and hooliganism. Unlike the works by Goh and Yeo, *A Song of the Wind* also explores the role of religion, specifically Islam, in the development of the main character. Told in the first person, the second half of the novel describes Ilham’s involvement with a heavily politically committed form of his faith at a time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East,

and a fear in Singapore of secret organisations whose intentions might be to overthrow the government. Ilham is arrested for his naïve involvement with a group that models itself on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and studies not only the scriptures and the *hadith* (traditions relating to the life of the Prophet Muhammad) but also the controversial works of Syed Qutb, Hasan Al-Bana, Maududi, M. Natsir and Maryam Jameela. Still only 21 at the end of the novel, Ilham is slowly leaving behind him the darkness of the "eclipse" into which his experiences have taken him (as clearly indicated by the title of the original Malay novel). He writes:

I was surprised how quickly I had matured. Not many youths were 'fortunate' enough to have had my experience.

My teenage years were ending ominously, everything was happening too quickly, spiralling out of control, and I was emerging into adulthood, crippled and alienated. (234)

Despite this gloom, Ilham has the promises of a positive future that includes marriage, entry into the university, and a worthwhile career to come. His faith has been deepened and shaped in the direction of an Islam that is, as Isa writes elsewhere, "a tolerant faith that is based on goodwill, consensus and humanitarian love" (*Intercession* 162).

"Hope and harmony" are the keystones for Isa's vision of a racially integrated Singapore ("Some Personal Reflections on Political Culture in Contemporary Singapore Malay Novels" 67). These three novels struggle with disharmony and tension within the Malay community and beyond, and their historical and sociological origins. They are deeply important works and a sure sign of the growing recognition that will be paid to his significant literary analyses of "the Singapore dilemma" and the choices for a peaceful way forward.

Works Cited

- Isa Kamari. *Intercession*. Trans. Sukmawati Sirat. Ed. Alvin Pang. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2009.
- Isa Kamari. "Some Personal Reflections on Political Culture in Contemporary Singapore Malay Novels." *Reading the Malay World*. Eds. Rick Hosking, Susan Hosking, Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan. Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2010. 66-76.
- Lily Zubaidah Rahim. *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1998.