

Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, *Confrontation*. Trans. Shafiq Selamat. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2013. 176 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-5557-7.

Much has been written and said regarding the decolonisation of Third World countries after the Second World War, and the disillusionment towards the discourse of nationalism that had been used to win their independence. With the benefit of hindsight, we have since learned that nationalism is not the magic pill that would cure all the evils of colonialism, especially the compartmentalisation of people into neat boxes of “race.” *Confrontation* requires the reader to confront the volatile forces that have been simmering for many years under the facade of a smooth, well-run colony, i.e. the fault lines among its citizens of different ethnicities, even as they move towards a new era of self-rule. This is the English-language translation of Mohamed Latiff Mohamed’s 1999 novel, originally titled *Batas Langit*.

The setting is Singapore in the years leading up to the merger with Malaya and immediately after. Mohamed Latiff depicts the uncertainty, excitement and violence of the late 1950s through to 1965 as experienced by Adi, a boy from a working-class Malay family whose fortune shifts as quickly as the tides of political change then sweeping the island and its neighbours, Malaya and Indonesia. The novel’s title, translated as *Confrontation*, may be taken to refer to *Konfrontasi*, Indonesia’s aggressive stance towards the then newly-formed Federation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965 and which is referred to several times in the second half of the narrative. However, the novel is really about the internal “confrontation” between rival political interests and ethnic groups in Malaysia which would eventually lead to Singapore’s separation from the Federation in 1965.

Kampung Pak Buyung where Adi and his family live is populated by poor, working-class Chinese and Malay families for whom poverty, ignorance and violence are the norm. The cast of characters include Adi’s family and neighbours: Mak Timah, his long-suffering mother; his neighbour and mentor, Abang Dolah, a young political activist anxious for a better future for the Malays; Tong Samboo and her two children; Salmah, an attractive bar hostess with a tragic past and an equally tragic ending; and Bibik, a Peranakan Chinese woman whose disabled granddaughter Adi’s mother adopts. The novel’s social realism is immediately evident in its unflinching portrayal of the bar hostesses, satay and *mee rebus*¹ sellers, laundrywomen, taxi drivers and other members of the working class who eke out a living in what was then one of Britain’s prized colonial outposts in Asia. In Part One of the novel, the villagers’ lives are harsh and difficult, but relatively calm, interspersed with bursts of violence when turf

¹ A dish of noodles in a thick and spicy gravy.

wars occur between rival secret societies. However, all that would change with the impending elections and growing calls for Singapore's independence through merger with Malaya.

Adi witnesses and experiences the landmark events of this period: the demonstration by Chinese high school students and later, by students of Malay schools demanding secondary-level education; political rallies calling for Singapore to become *Merdeka*, Malaysia's birth in 1963. Adi's star rises with that of Malaysia – he is among the first batch of students to attend a Malay-medium secondary school, learning Malay language and literature, English, mathematics and science instead of the colonially-prescribed gardening and basket-weaving of the recent past. It is a time of great hope for Singapore's Malays, a minority community, as grand plans for a national mosque to be built on the Padang are floated, Malay becomes the preferred language and higher education is no longer an impossible dream but a reality.

There are many things going on in this novel – the undercurrents of political and ethnic tension, the uncertainty of Singaporean Malays as to their place in the post-colonial nation, social unrest, the Cold War. At times, the reader struggles to place events in their context as the author (deliberately?) refers to the various political parties as “the axe logo party,” “the goat's head logo party” and “the flame logo party” instead of their real names. The names of important Singaporean and Malaysian leaders are also not mentioned, only alluded to; the reader needs to make the extra effort to read up on Singaporean and Malaysian politics in the 1960s in order to navigate the text better.

Adi's mentor, Abang Dolah emerges as the novel's most compelling character. A high school graduate, he chooses not to work and keeps himself employed as, alternately, a teacher of the Qur'an, a political activist, a musician, and a *bomoh*.² Abang Dolah's politics is a mix of pro-Malay sentiments, socialism and anti-colonialism. He wants independence for Singapore but resents the multi-ethnic coalition of leaders and supporters of *Merdeka*, believing rather naively in a greater pan-Malay political entity that would restore power to the Malays. The contradictions embodied by this character keep the reader just as intrigued as Adi is:

Adi was surprised that Abang Dolah refused to work. He was a spirited man, active in politics. He loved his people and his country and wanted to defend the poor and the oppressed. Yet, he did not want to work. He did not want to use his intelligence to seek money. Adi found the contradictions perplexing. (141)

² A Malay shaman or witch-doctor whose services are called upon for various purposes, such as casting spells on one's enemies, building a house, curing illnesses both physical and spiritual and exorcising evil spirits.

Abang Dolah is the real tragic figure of this novel as events overtake him; despite his involvement in politics, he fails to read the greater forces at play in the region, such as when Soekarno, his idol, attacks the Federation of Malaysia.

The real loss of the Singapore affair is the separation of people whose ties go beyond their ethnic markers of identity. After the deadly riots of 1964, the multicultural fabric of Kampung Pak Buyung is torn apart. Bibik, the old Peranakan Chinese woman, puts it best: “For hundreds of years we’ve been living together, like brothers, without any fights, and now they all want to fight each other! Curse those gangsters!” (153). Bibik in particular is like a family member because she entrusted her disabled granddaughter to Mak Timah’s care. This might strike the younger generation as unusual, but adoption of children of Chinese descent by Malay families did occur in the past, usually because of poverty.

Much thought has gone into the book’s design, particularly the cover and the illustrations within. It has one of the most arresting covers I have seen in a long time: the photo of a child whose eyes stare directly at readers with a sombre expression. Silhouettes of a *kampung* house, a banyan tree and the profile of a boy’s head are featured in the first pages, taken from images described by the author such as the massive banyan tree in Kampung Pak Buyung. However, there were several errors in the text such as the same character being referred to by two different names and missing words that interrupt a smooth reading of the text. These are errors that the editor should take note of.

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