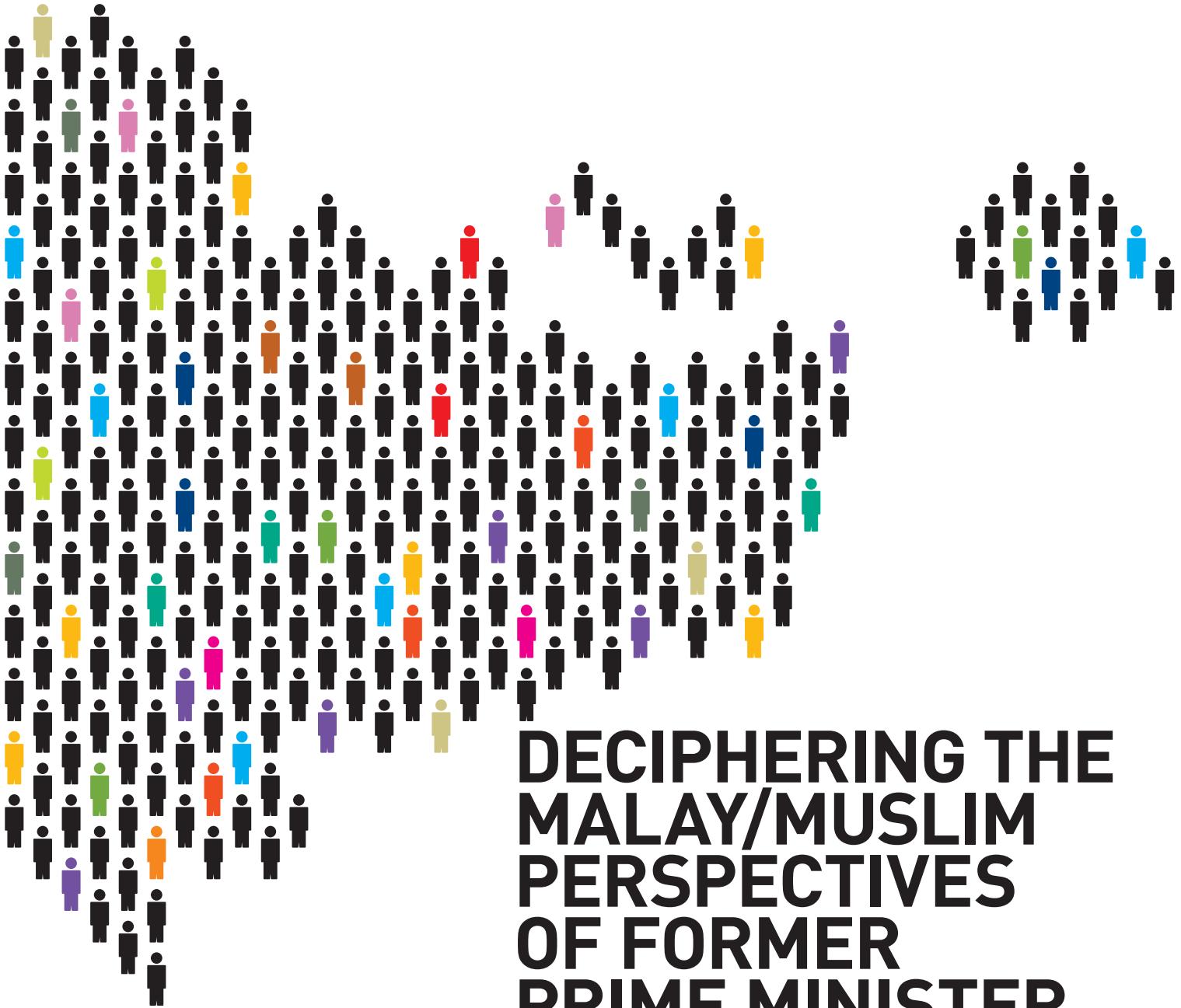


THE KARYAWAN

PROFESSIONALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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**DECIPHERING THE
MALAY/MUSLIM
PERSPECTIVES
OF FORMER
PRIME MINISTER
LEE HSIEN LOONG**

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The leadership of former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has left a significant and multifaceted impact on the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore. Over his two decades in office, Mr Lee's efforts to connect with the community, his support for cultural and religious inclusivity, and his commitment to social harmony have been widely acknowledged and appreciated.

In his article on *Page 9*, Dr Mustafa Izzuddin explores the various dimensions of Mr Lee's engagement with the Malay/Muslim community and delves into key policies introduced by the Lee government. He also recognises that not all policies and stances of the Lee government were met with unanimous approval. The government's longstanding position against collective Malay leadership and its mixed handling of LGBTQ issues, for example, have raised points of contention among various segments of the community. Nevertheless, his article calls upon readers to recognise the key contributions made by Mr Lee to the progress of the Malay-Muslim community.

As we reflect on the past leadership and look towards the future under Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, it is crucial to acknowledge the continued importance of fostering strong relationships with the Malay/Muslim community. Mr Wong's commitment to this community as a central part of his Forward Singapore exercise is a promising sign of ongoing support and engagement.

In this issue, it is our hope that Dr Mustafa's reflection will inspire continued dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that the Malay/Muslim community remains an integral and vibrant part of Singapore's social fabric.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes.

FATHURRAHMAN DAWOED
SUPERVISING EDITOR

Education Reforms over the Past Few Decades: How Best Can Parents Respond?

BY ASSOC PROF JASON TAN



Singapore's education landscape has indisputably changed over the past few decades. These changes have been felt at all levels of schooling, and have encompassed not only revisions to subject syllabi but also wider turns in policy direction.

Why do all of these reforms matter to parents of school-age children? After all, aren't schools and teachers well-equipped to take care of students and guide them through their schooling years?

This article will begin by outlining some of the major reforms that have swept through Singapore's education system. It will then highlight the implications of these reforms for students and parents, before discussing some of the ways in which parents can best respond.

Education is a topic that most adults feel they are able to comment on. Almost everyone has been to school and remembers attending lessons in different subjects and enjoying extra- or co-curricular activities, along with sitting for tests and examinations.

It is easy enough for parents to urge their children to behave themselves and to 'study hard' in order to be able to get 'a good job' and 'a better life' upon leaving school. At the same time, some parents may feel that their children's success in school is largely determined by the teachers' ability to guide their students well, and also their children's own 'ability to study'.

However, it is important for parents to be aware that the context within which they attended school may be rather different from that facing their children. It is probably correct to say that the vast majority of parents of children who are currently in school attended primary and secondary school anywhere between the 1970s and the 2000s.

What are some of the ways in which the education landscape has changed since then?

CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The first is the much greater variety of schools and programmes, as part of a deliberate policy shift towards offering

parents and students more diversity, flexibility and choice. A major signal in this direction came in the mid-1980s when the then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke of according school leaders greater operating autonomy. Over the next decade or so, the Ministry of Education allowed some secondary schools to become independent or autonomous schools. These schools were able to have more say in terms of matters such as student enrolment and the kinds of programmes they offered.

The 2000s saw the advent of integrated programmes that allowed the top 10 percent of each secondary age cohort to have six years of schooling without having to sit for any major national examination. At the same time, the secondary schooling landscape was further diversified over the next two decades with the emergence of new schools such as the School of the Arts and Crest Secondary School.

The post-secondary landscape has also been diversified with, for instance, the increase in the number of publicly-funded universities. Compared with two such universities in the 1990s, there are now six of them, with a seventh, the Singapore University of the Arts, poised to admit students in August this year.

Within primary and secondary schools, students have been allowed more diversity and choice in terms of niche programmes or Applied Learning programmes. Each school is allowed the flexibility to determine its own slate of such programmes and develop its particular areas of strength while providing possibilities for student development that most of their parents may not have had access to at that age.

Another major change has been in some of the structures that determine how students access schooling opportunities.

A prime driver of these changes in admission policies has been the official desire to address the long-standing issue of Singapore's education system being overly fixated on academic grades. Another has been the recognition that academic grades alone will be insufficient to prepare students for the future challenges facing them in the workplace. These changes aim to send strong signals to schools, parents and students about the importance of

skills and attributes such as leadership, communication and cross-cultural competencies. They also tie in with the greater latitude accorded individual schools to develop their own areas of strength.

In the 2000s, discretionary admission policies were introduced in publicly-funded universities, secondary schools, junior colleges and polytechnics. Probably the most well-known of these is the Direct School Admission scheme for secondary schools and junior colleges. This scheme allows students to apply for provisional admission, before sitting for the Primary School Leaving Examination or General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examination, on the basis of their talents or strengths in areas such as dance or sports. About 11 percent of the age cohort was admitted to secondary school in this manner in 2023.

Likewise, the Early Admissions Exercise for the Institute of Technical Education and Polytechnics allows students to secure admission on the basis of relevant skills and experiences. The publicly-funded universities have aptitude-based admissions policies, with the Nanyang Technological University admitting 57 percent of its first-year undergraduates in 2023 on this basis.

In addition, since 2013, the polytechnics have introduced a Polytechnic Foundation Programme that allows selected Secondary Four Normal (Academic) course students an alternative route to polytechnics by enrolling in a one-year practice-oriented curriculum.

Besides admission policies, the way in which students are able to have more flexibility and choice is through the replacement of streaming by subject-based banding at both primary and secondary levels. Most parents will be familiar with having been streamed at one or more points during their own school days. One of the major bugbears of the streaming system was its tendency to pigeonhole students within particular streams while not allowing for the reality of differing individual strengths and aptitudes in various subjects. The introduction of subject-based banding began in primary schools in 2008 and has now included secondary schools this year. Under subject-based banding, students are better

able to take various subjects such as English language or science at a level that better meets their learning needs.

Another important change that has been introduced, this time within the last decade, is the reduction in the number of examinations at the primary and secondary levels. As with some of the other reforms that have been mentioned earlier, this change in assessment policy was meant to address the high levels of stress among both parents and students associated with testing and to move away from an over-emphasis on academic results. Mid-year examinations for all primary and secondary schools were removed by 2023, with junior colleges and Millennia Institute following suit this year. The official rationale for this reduction is to free up examination preparation time for self-directed learning and the development of 21st-century competencies.

RETHINKING OF MERITOCRACY

Underlying all these reforms over the past two decades has been what the Singapore government terms a 'rethinking of meritocracy', in which the idea of what constitutes 'merit' needs re-examination. Instead of a 'meritocracy of grades', in which a student's academic accomplishments in the first two decades of life largely or solely determine his or her success in life, the government has suggested instead a few ways to reconceptualise 'meritocracy'. The first is a 'lifelong meritocracy', which is linked with the active promotion over the past decade of lifelong learning. The second is a 'meritocracy of skills' that emphasises the acquisition of workplace-relevant skills. The third is an 'inclusive meritocracy', which allows for second chances as well as for different pathways to success. Next is a 'compassionate meritocracy' that attempts to blunt the harsher edges of an ideology that is in danger of encouraging an individualistic 'survival of the fittest' mentality. Another is a 'contributory meritocracy' in which individual success is gauged not on the sole basis of academic grades or career accomplishments but also on contributions to the wider society or the world.

Having outlined some of the major developments in Singapore's education landscape over the past four decades, it is clear that many parents will feel bewildered when they confront the reality

While some parents may still think that they can safely rely on their children's teachers to help their children navigate the diversified education landscape, parents have to remember that teachers will likely never be able to have the same degree of intimate knowledge of their children's personalities and talents, or the dreams and hopes for success, that parents possess. Parents may on occasion have to be active advocates for their children's learning, for instance, through consultations with teachers about opportunities for talent development or the implications of education reforms for their children's academic and non-academic learning.

that schooling is no longer the same for their children as it once was for them. The approaches that these parents, and their own parents, adopted may not work as well for their own school-age children now.

For one thing, behind the apparent benefits of greater diversity, flexibility and choice for parents and students lies the question of what to do with all of this. The offer of more diversity, flexibility and choice will not benefit parents and students if they are unable or unwilling to make informed decisions and choices.

HOW THEN CAN PARENTS BEST RESPOND?

Informed decision-making involves a few stages: being aware that there are varied options; assembling the full variety of options; assessing the merits or disadvantages of each of the choices; and then making the final decision. The Ministry of Education is well aware of the need for informed decision-making and advises parents, for instance, to choose secondary schools judiciously by engaging in a three-stage process. The first involves

parents talking to their children about their strengths, interests and learning styles. The second is to consider factors such as courses, programmes, subjects and co-curricular activities offered in various schools, along with school culture and transportation options. The third stage is about parents working with their children to shortlist schools based on their children's strengths, interests and learning styles as well as schools' Primary School Leaving Examination entry score ranges.

Not mentioned in this list is the role played by parental aspirations for their children. These aspirations do not appear suddenly at the end of primary schooling but are instead longer-term in nature. At the same time, aspirations are of little value if nothing is done to act on them. The decision to act affects fundamental matters such as parents' perceptions of their roles in aiding their children's educational success.

In the current education landscape, it may no longer be sufficient for parents to think of their roles as merely encouraging their

children to 'study hard', ensuring that homework is completed regularly or even attending parent-teacher meetings regularly.

One clear case of this is the question of informed decision-making. For instance, when choosing a secondary school from among almost 150 schools, not only do parents need to get access to the necessary information about the diversity of secondary schools and admission schemes, they also need to know what to do with this information. How do they make sense of the options in order to arrive at a decision that best serves their child's needs?

Another thing for parents to consider when trying to act on their aspirations is how they can mobilise their resources to support their children's educational success. Many parents would probably think of how they can buy learning resources or tutoring services with their financial resources. But there is also the vital matter of accumulating knowledge of each of their children's growth and development, both academic and non-academic. Yet another valuable resource is social networks, which are often a key way of getting access to information and evaluating choices. Such information may also include opportunities to help their children develop their talents, as in the case of the Junior Sports Academy, which offers selected Primary Four students up to two years of free-of-charge coaching in a variety of sports.

While some parents may still think that they can safely rely on their children's teachers to help their children navigate the diversified education landscape, parents have to remember that teachers will likely never be able to have the same degree of intimate knowledge of their children's personalities and talents, or the dreams and hopes for success, that parents possess. Parents may on occasion have to be active advocates for their children's learning, for instance, through consultations with teachers about opportunities for talent development or the implications of education reforms for their children's academic and non-academic learning.

The last few paragraphs have alluded to the existence in Singapore of what the British sociologist Phillip Brown termed

a 'parentocracy', in which a child's educational success is increasingly dependent on his or her parents' wealth and wishes rather than on the child's ability and effort. Some of the government's attempts to rethink meritocracy and reform the education system acknowledge the existence of such inter-familial inequalities.

In summary, the ways in which the education system has evolved over the past few decades place parents of school-age children in a position where they have to exercise much more responsibility in ensuring their children's educational success than was the case when they themselves underwent schooling a few decades ago. The potential benefits from greater diversity, flexibility and choice, along with the provision of multiple pathways to success, will be less realisable if parents do not confront this reality and take active steps in guiding their children's growth and development. ■



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Navigating Faith: The Religious Experience of Muslim Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore

Recently, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) spearheaded a webinar focusing on the religious experiences of Muslim migrant workers in Singapore¹. The webinar addressed several critical issues, including the diverse socio-religious realities of Muslim migrant workers in Singapore, the significance of religious spaces for these workers, and the accessibility of religious education tailored to their specific jurisprudential backgrounds. Additionally, the discussion highlighted the social and bureaucratic challenges faced by these workers and proposed steps to alleviate their conditions.

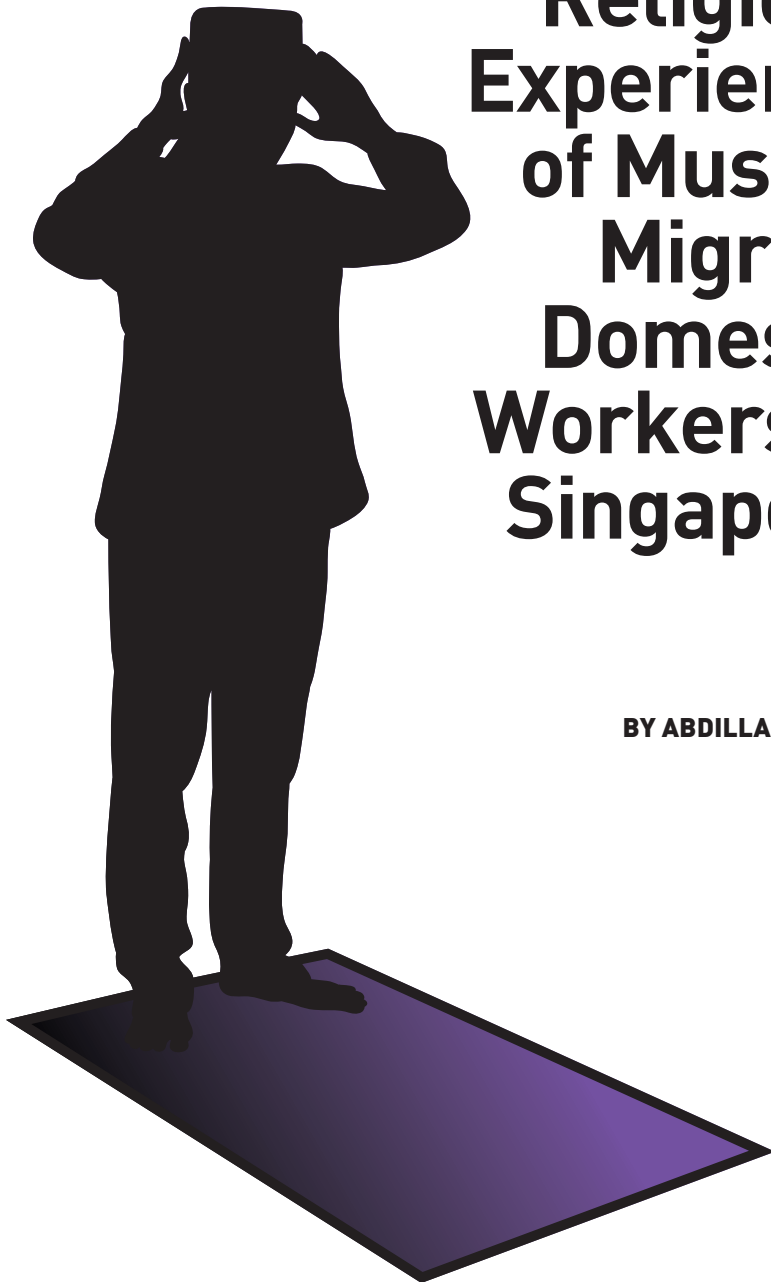
Another segment of Muslim migrant workers, who maintain closer physical proximity to the Muslim community in Singapore, comprises the migrant domestic workers or helpers employed in the homes of their employers. These helpers, who are often employed by Muslim employers – predominantly Malays – differ from their counterparts in the construction sector due to shared linguistic capabilities and cultural similarities, as many hail from Indonesia². This geographical and cultural proximity facilitates a more nuanced integration into the Malay Muslim community in Singapore. Despite many cultural similarities shared with the local Malay Muslim community, many of the religious experiences encountered by domestic helpers may overlap significantly with those of construction migrant workers.

BY ABDILLAH AMMAR

BUREAUCRATIC CHALLENGES

Before we explore the religious experiences of these helpers, perhaps we should look at the bureaucratic impediments they are facing, as it provides insights into the accessibility and lack thereof of religious resources in Singapore which ultimately shape a huge part of the religious experiences they have.

One of the biggest challenges Muslim domestic migrant workers face in Singapore is dealing with the bureaucratic system. Many of these workers arrive without adequate knowledge of their rights and the resources available to them. This information gap is further complicated by their reliance on employers, who often



¹ RIMA. 'Religious Experience of Muslim Migrant Workers in Singapore | RIMA'. Accessed 10 June 2024. <https://rima.sg/religious-experience-of-muslim-migrant-workers-in-singapore/>.
² Denisse. '7 Best Indonesian Maid Agencies in Singapore'. The Singaporean (blog), 21 November 2022. <https://thesingaporean.sg/indonesian-maid-agencies/>.

control access to these resources. The imbalance of power between employers and employees can result in workers being unaware of their rights, and effectively being unable to advocate for themselves.

The complexity of the bureaucratic system and the limited distribution of information in a language the workers understand, which is Indonesian, leave many unaware of their full rights. This dependency on employers for information and resources can lead to exploitative situations where workers are denied their basic rights. The bureaucratic framework established by state laws and policies, coupled with hiring practices that demand flexibility, adds to the unstable nature of their employment.

Based on several personal interviews I conducted, Asiyah, a helper working in a household in Sembawang, acknowledges that Singapore has strict laws against criminal acts, including those committed by local citizens against migrant workers. However, she remains unsure of the exact steps she needs to take to fully protect herself in situations such as facing abuse from her employer.

Although the government has taken steps to improve the working and living conditions of these helpers, such as entitling them to one rest day per month or at least two half days a month from January 2023 onwards³, more can be done to ensure their overall quality of life.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The religious education that Muslim helpers receive in their home countries often differs significantly from what they encounter in Singapore. Many of these helpers come from communities deeply rooted in a communal culture of learning religion together in spaces like mosques, alongside neighbours and family members. While they may adhere to the same Shafi'i school of thought as most Muslims in Singapore⁴, it is important to recognise the different social contexts they come from. Indonesia, being a vast country, encompasses various provinces with

diverse ethnic groups, each with unique cultural approaches to religious education.

For instance, helpers from secluded villages in the ethnically homogenous Central Java province which comprises mostly Javanese people⁵, may not be accustomed to Singapore's multicultural environment, having primarily learned Islam from people within their own close-knit communities. On the other hand, those from Jakarta might be more adaptable, having been exposed to a more diverse cultural milieu and thus more accustomed to interacting with people from different backgrounds.

Consequently, their ability to learn from culturally diverse teachers in Singapore can vary greatly.

Dewi, a helper from Cirebon, shared that back in her hometown, while she may not have a formal religious education, she is very much versed in a number of religious subjects by virtue of attending the mosque situated in her village. These religious teachers, addressed as *santris*, would give out sermons and religious guidance to the villagers and hold an important role in disseminating religious education⁶.

Understanding these nuances is crucial to appreciating the diverse religious experiences of these helpers. It highlights the need for tailored approaches to religious education that consider their varied backgrounds and ensure that they receive the support they need to continue their religious practices effectively.

Additionally, language is another aspect that impedes helpers' access to religious education. Although the Malay language is quite similar to Bahasa Indonesia in many ways, these helpers come from various parts of Indonesia and may be accustomed to speaking their ethnic languages or dialects. The way Singaporean Malays speak Malay, often mixing it with Singlish (Singaporean English), can also be a hurdle for these helpers to overcome.

Furthermore, time is another factor preventing access to religious education. Many of these helpers are already burdened with numerous chores in their assigned homes. Often, they are overworked and exhausted from their tasks. When they do get some time for themselves, it is typically used to recharge and rest at home so that they can maintain their work quality.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT SYSTEM

When it comes to accessing the religious support system in Singapore for the betterment of their mental health through mediums such as receiving personal religious counselling and guidance, or even culturally tailored therapy sessions, once again, the support seems a little inadequate for these Muslim helpers.

As previously mentioned, these Muslim helpers often rely heavily on the *santris* back home for religious guidance. This guidance typically includes informal counselling sessions and a strong sense of community, which they miss when they move to Singapore. Once in Singapore, they may not be fully aware of the various helplines or support systems available to them. Many also come from regions where mental health is not openly discussed⁷, further exacerbating their mental health. This lack of awareness means they may not recognise the need for a proper support system for their mental health.

Moreover, while local religious teachers may double up as emotional support providers for the local Muslim population through initiatives such as the Asatizah Solace Care⁸, this fact is not widely known to these helpers. The inability of these religious teachers to relate to the Muslim helpers due to different cultural backgrounds is another significant factor. This cultural gap can lead to misunderstandings and a diminished sense of empathy, making it much more difficult for these helpers to connect fully with these religious teachers and share their problems effectively. These teachers may also struggle to comprehend the nuances of the helpers' diverse cultural

³ Ministry of Manpower Singapore. 'Rest Days, Health and Well-Being for Migrant Domestic Workers'. Accessed 10 June 2024.

⁴ <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/employers-guide/rest-days-and-well-being>.

⁵ Britannica. T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Shafi'i". Encyclopaedia Britannica, April 10, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shafiiyah>.

⁶ Oey, Eric, ed. Java. 3rd ed. Periplus Adventure Guides. [Hong Kong]: Singapore: Periplus Editions; Distributor, Berkeley Books, 1997.

⁷ Sa'dullah Assa'id. The Growth of Pesantren in Indonesia as the Islamic Venue and Social Class Status of Santri. Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 2021. <https://doi.org/93> [2021] 425-440.

⁸ Hartini, Nurul, Nur Ainy Fardana, Atika Dian Ariana, and Nido Dipo Wardana. 'Stigma toward People with Mental Health Problems in Indonesia'. Psychology Research and Behavior: Management 11 (31 October 2018): 535-41.

⁹ Pergas. 'Asatizah Solace Care'. Accessed 11 June 2024. <https://www.pergas.org.sg/what-we-do/community-dakwah-oureach/asatizah-solace-care/>.

backgrounds, hindering their ability to provide effective, tailored support.

Due to the obstacles in accessing proper religious support system for themselves, they feel more burdened and isolated, and it impacts their religious experience here negatively.

SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE IN SINGAPORE

The socio-cultural landscape of Singapore presents both opportunities and challenges for Muslim domestic migrant workers. On one hand, Singapore's diverse and multicultural society offers a level of acceptance and tolerance towards these helpers. However, the experience of integration into the local community, whether the Muslim community or the Singaporean community at large, varies. Some workers find acceptance and support, especially from local Muslims who share their faith, while others struggle with feelings of exclusion and prejudice from employers who simply lack the empathy and cultural awareness of these helpers who are culturally different from them.

The way the community perceives these Muslim helpers greatly influences their ability to fully connect and integrate into society. These helpers are usually seen as mere workers who come to make a living in Singapore, therefore there is a diminished sense of care shown to them, as they are regarded as people from outside the community. The classist behaviour exhibited by certain segments of the community toward these low-earning helpers, who are often restricted to house chores and caretaker duties, further aggravates their ability to connect with other segments of the local community.

However, it is worth noting that this is not always the case. Many employers are generally accepting of these helpers. For many Muslim families who choose to engage them, the similarity in faith and, to some extent, religious culture makes it easier for them to integrate into the small communities within these families. Many of them partake in religious cultural traditions such as *tahlil* gatherings, *mawlid*s, and gatherings for well-being, and have the freedom to interact with extended family members of their employers, eat the same delicious food at these gatherings, and connect with other

helpers who may be present during these events.

Outside of these settings, the connections, and networks they form with other helpers through such events allow them to create a unique small community of their own in Singapore. They bond with other helpers due to the shared nature of their work, providing a support system whenever needed.

While it is not entirely the same as the experiences they have back home, the connections formed through these small communities offer a semblance of the communal support they are accustomed to. The *tahlil* gatherings and *mawlid*s may not be the same, but they are still shared cultural aspects they can experience here. These gatherings and interactions provide a crucial emotional and social lifeline, allowing the helpers to share their challenges, celebrate their achievements, and maintain their cultural and religious practices. This network of fellow helpers and supportive employers can significantly alleviate feelings of isolation and homesickness, fostering a sense of belonging and community in a foreign land.

MOVING FORWARD

In our efforts to improve the well-being and social integration of these Muslim helpers, a holistic approach undertaken by many members and stakeholders in the society is necessary.

Addressing bureaucratic challenges is crucial. Streamlining processes and improving the dissemination of information in languages the helpers understand can empower them to advocate for their rights more effectively. Additionally, educating employers about the rights of helpers is essential to prevent exploitative practices and ensure a supportive work environment.

To support these helpers, it is vital to enhance access to religious education that is sensitive to their cultural needs. Providing classes in languages they understand and adjusting to their schedules can help them maintain their religious practices and find comfort in their faith while away from home. A strong religious support system is needed, with local religious teachers and

counsellors who are trained to address the specific cultural and emotional needs of these helpers, ensuring that they adopt a culturally competent framework. Promoting initiatives like Asatizah Solace Care can ensure that these workers know about and can easily access these resources. Building empathy and cultural understanding among religious leaders is essential to bridging cultural gaps and making these helpers feel more welcomed and supported.

In facilitating their social integration, addressing classist attitudes that lead to social isolation is essential. Community programmes that promote interaction between helpers and local residents can enhance mutual understanding and respect. Celebrating diversity and fostering inclusivity can help these workers feel recognised and part of the community. Employers are key to this integration, as their participation and appreciation of the cultural traditions and religious practices of their helpers can build a more inclusive and supportive environment, thereby strengthening the relationship between employers and workers.

To conclude, enhancing the experiences of Muslim helpers in Singapore involves tackling bureaucratic obstacles, improving religious education and support systems, and promoting socio-cultural integration. By taking these steps, these Muslim helpers can not only contribute to Singapore's economy but also experience a sense of belonging and community in their new environment. This comprehensive approach will enrich Singapore's cultural fabric, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society. ■

Abdillah Ammar is currently an undergraduate in the National University of Singapore double majoring in Political Science & Sociology. He is also taking a part-time degree in Hadith at Al-Madinah International University. His research interests include Sufi metaphysics, comparative politics and the role of customs in the Islamic legal tradition.

DECIPHERING THE MALAY/MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES OF FORMER PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG

BY DR MUSTAFA IZZUDDIN



In his two decades as Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Hsien Loong has been largely viewed as being favourable and commendatory by the Muslim community in Singapore. Notwithstanding the oscillating domestic public opinion of his administration over a 20-year period, his laudable leadership of Singapore, relatability to ground sentiments, and affable personality have endeared him to Muslims in Singapore.

As most Muslims are Malays in Singapore, Lee's ability to speak the Malay language has been crucial in connecting to the Malay ground; resonating, in particular, with the older generation of Singaporeans. It also underscored the importance placed by Lee vis-à-vis Malay being the national language, and a salient cultural tool of effective communication between the government and the Malay-speaking citizenry.

The especial recognition of Muslims being diverse in Singapore and the sustained interest in increasing his cultural knowledge about them was a strong suit of Lee; and from the perspective of the Muslim community, a reflection of thoughtful and percipient leadership. The heterogeneity of Muslims emanates from an assortment of ethnicities, languages, and jurisprudential differences in Singapore; and it was thus regarded by Lee's government as vital and necessary to espouse a socially accommodative backdrop and promote unity in diversity to ensure a more harmonious society. Such a mindset and approach have earned Lee plaudits from the diverse Muslim community as it demonstrated sensitivity and inclusivity.

That Lee was steadfast in upholding the secularity of the country also gained him traction among Muslims. Under the secularism umbrella, Muslims have been able to practise their faith freely so long as it does not impinge on the interests of the Singapore state. In fact, Lee lent his support for the construction and the subsequent opening of the Yusof Ishak Mosque in 2017. He was also cognisant of mosques frequented by members of the Muslim community who may not speak Malay, including the Tamils and Malayalees, as well as the Gujarati Dawoodi Bohras who have been congregating at the Burhani Mosque since 1897.

Lee's earnest desire for the Malay/Muslim (Malays and other Muslims) community to continue uplifting themselves, pursuing excellence and being employable was a common thread of his prime-ministership. He also had a penchant for the *kampong* spirit of *gotong-royong* (communal helping of one another to achieve a collective goal) as the foundational basis for the Malay/Muslim community to strengthen itself through the auspices of self-help and self-reliance, underpinned by the spirit of communitarianism. As illustrated in his remarks at MENDAKI's 40th anniversary, Lee is a staunch proponent of MENDAKI's role in the upliftment, empowerment and educational development of the Malay/Muslim community.

The tremendous ease by which Lee connected with different communities in Singapore, including the Malay/Muslim community, was one of his fortes. Throughout his prime-ministership, Lee took an abiding interest in the progress and development of the Malay/Muslim community, as no Malay/Muslim should be left behind, sharing in the collective prosperity of Singapore. While there are some in the community who felt that Lee should have done more for the Malay/Muslims, many others believe that he has done much for the community, ensuring the fostering and sustaining of an inclusive community of excellence.

Lee's distinct ability to transcend generational differences by constructively engaging both the old and young also resonated with different segments of the Malay/Muslim community. His sense of empathy and compassion for the less fortunate was discernible and his readiness to listen to ground sentiments was commendable. On his watch, no existential issue of concern to the Malay/Muslim community was off-limits for discussion, culminating in some form of realistic resolution. Although some within the community disapproved of the Lee government holding such discussions behind closed doors, it was believed to be necessary due to the sensitive nature of such issues under discussion. One such illustration was the donning of headscarves by Muslim women in certain professions, which was a recurring theme throughout his prime-ministership.

That Lee was steadfast in upholding the secularity of the country also gained him traction among Muslims. Under the secularism umbrella, Muslims have been able to practise their faith freely so long as it does not impinge on the interests of the Singapore state. In fact, Lee lent his support for the construction and the subsequent opening of the Yusof Ishak Mosque in 2017.

It was therefore a watershed moment when Lee announced in his National Day Rally speech in 2021 that Muslim nurses in the healthcare sector will be allowed to wear headscarves (*tudungs*) with their uniforms if they wish to, consonant with hospital guidelines. That this proclamation was made by the Prime Minister himself on the highest possible platform in addressing the nation underlined the paramount importance of social implications stemming from this policy change, which concomitantly reflected societal progress.

For this policy change to preserve Singapore's fragile social harmony, it also necessitated acceptance from non-Muslims, which the Lee government took pains to engage and win over via religious and non-religious leaders. Despite some hard-line secularists continuing to express their disquiet and displeasure, the Lee government remained firm on making this policy change for the benefit of the Muslim community.

As evidenced by the reactions of the Muslim community to this policy change, it was certainly welcomed and appreciated by many, including those who tended to be critical of the Lee government. There were, however, those who felt that this policy change was long overdue and limited in scope, applying only to the public healthcare sector and not to other sectors, such as the police force. Despite these prevailing criticisms, the headscarf policy modification was a crowning moment in Lee's civic engagement with the Malay/Muslim community and has cemented Lee's place in history among the Muslims in Singapore.

At a time when Islam is being hijacked and its verses misconstrued for political gains by terrorist groups across the world, the painstaking efforts undertaken by the Lee government to prevent the scapegoating of Muslims in Singapore brought Lee considerable praise from the Malay/Muslims. Lee's resolute support for the work being done by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in reintegrating radicalised individuals into society after rehabilitating them was also welcomed by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Recognising the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) as a central

hub on all matters Muslim, Lee's unwavering recognition and strong backing of MUIS as a privileged interlocutor is certainly lauded by the Muslims in Singapore. Lee's penchant for interfaith and intra-faith matters also led to him forging a close rapport with the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) whose work in preserving religious harmony endeared the organisation to Muslims in Singapore, including the fact that Islam is represented on the IRO Council.

Strongly backing the Malay political leadership also earned Lee many plaudits, as he perceived the Malay voice in politics as being important for the community. Of course, the Malay vote, especially those in the middle ground, also matters at election time, so being able to garner as much support as possible from the Malays and other Muslims was of paramount political importance for the ruling party. As is the case with other voters, Malay/Muslims also see as salient for there to be oppositional voices in parliament, so there is substantial support within the community for the sole opposition Malay Member of Parliament.

Possibly dividing opinion among Malay/Muslims is the longstanding position of the government, including under Lee, for disapproving the emergence of two competing leaderships, encapsulated in a proposal for collective Malay leadership. Although such an idea continued to be floated under the Lee administration, it did not see the light of day and often vanished in a puff of smoke. This is because the Lee government is averse to the splitting of the Malay community and the undermining of the Malay political leadership.

Lee's support for non-governmental Malay/Muslim Organisations (MMOs) was lauded by the community. Throughout his prime-ministership, Lee interacted with many MMO leaders, even remembering many of them by name. He made it a point to grace the anniversaries of some of the MMOs, including Jamiyah's 80th anniversary in 2012, the 60th anniversary of the Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM) in 2008, and the 25th anniversary of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) in 2016. As much as Lee strongly supported the Malay political leadership, it was to his credit that he had also done

the same with Malay/Muslim community leaders whose wisdom and expertise benefited society as a whole.

The Lee government's repeal of 377A, which criminalises sex between men, led to a mixed bag of opinions in the Muslim community, as part of the community's broader concern of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) movement gaining ground in Singapore. That the Lee government engaged Muslim leaders prior to the repeal and MUIS issuing religious guidance after the repeal were crucial to quelling the fears of the Malay/Muslims. They were advised that it is the Islamic way to treat everyone with dignity and respect, irrespective of sexual orientation. For added assurance, and which was welcomed by Muslims and non-Muslims who are against same-sex marriages, the Lee government amended the constitution to protect the definition of marriage between one man and one woman from being challenged in the courts. At the same time, LGBTQ individuals who see themselves as belonging to the Malay/Muslim community would have regarded the repeal by the Lee government and the prudent MUIS' religious guidance as positive and comforting.

With wokeism increasingly becoming more extreme as a global movement and gaining traction with millennials, Lee cautioned against blindly embracing it as wokery 'does not make us a more resilient, cohesive society with a strong sense of solidarity'. His stance on wokeness making life burdensome earned him praise by the more conservative and centrist segments of Singapore society, including among the Malay/Muslims in the country.

As Malay/Muslims are also Singaporeans, their perspective of Lee is also informed by his leadership of Singapore in the external realm. Under Lee, he ensured that Singapore would always remain respected, relevant and resilient on the international stage. Far more Singaporeans, including his most ardent critics, acknowledged that Lee provided a safe and steady pair of hands navigating Singapore through turbulent geopolitical waters in order to keep progressing economically while keeping the domestic social compact intact. His astute diplomatic

For the Malay/Muslims, the perspectives of Lee do vary, but all things considered, they perceive him, on balance, as being a trusted and reliable friend of the community and that history will remember him favourably. As much as there are sceptics and critics, there are also those who see Lee positively and in high regard. Lee will also be remembered as making Singapore the pride of the Southeast Asian region and the world as a small state in international relations. His legacy as a local and global statesman is assured and will continue to inspire generations to come, including right now as Senior Minister in Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's Cabinet.

statesmanship in ensuring that Singapore's bilateral relations with Indonesia and Malaysia continued to be even-keeled, led to him being panegyricized by the local Malay/Muslims.


Despite the misgivings by some quarters in the Malay/Muslim community of Singapore being a friend of Israel, many appreciate the fact that the Lee government has undertaken efforts to aid the Palestinians through technical assistance and humanitarian relief, and has voted every year in favour of the resolution on the 'Question of Palestine' with the rest of the world, including the call for a ceasefire in the recent flare-up. The Lee government also lambasted the post by the Israel Embassy in Singapore when it drew on the Quran to make a political point on the Israel-Palestine conflict, as it risks 'undermining the safety, security and harmony in Singapore' – a swift pushback being favourably perceived by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Taking the time to have a governmental dialogue with Malay/Muslims on the Israel-Palestine conflict – despite not

always agreeing on everything – was also welcomed by the community.

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The good news is that Wong is on the same wavelength as Lee on the importance of the Malay/Muslim community to preserving the social compact. Existing signs point to Wong cultivating a strong rapport with the Malay/Muslims, deeming them to be a

centrepiece of his signature Forward Singapore exercise. ■



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Supporting Inclusive Employment: Working Towards Inclusive Workplaces

BY AISHAH MOHD SAID



In the first year of my graduate studies, I remembered feeling awed and intrigued at the same time when my lecturer walked into the classroom. He had visual impairment and was being led by a fellow staff to the teacher's table. Dr Wong Meng Ee started setting up his laptop, plugged in his earpiece and started his lecture. I expected to learn about special needs in the course but this was a whole new experience of learning as I saw first-hand how he overcame barriers. Dr Wong shared with us his life story and how he had to persevere and surmount many challenges to get to be a lecturer. More than 10 years on, I am glad that we have been moving forward progressively in supporting inclusive employment in Singapore.

With more support given to students with special needs in the education field, more of these students have progressed on to institutions of higher learning such as the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and attained better qualifications and

skills for themselves. Unfortunately, this does not equate to them getting meaningful and sustainable employment upon graduation. In fact, we have seen many of these ITE graduates who are unable to be meaningfully employed, only to return to take other courses of the same qualification. What are the barriers to meaningful employment for these persons with special needs?

UNRAVELLING BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

Barriers to inclusive employment are complex and can hinder the successful integration of persons with special needs into the workplace. I have been working with Danny, a student with autism, for the past 2 years and I remember him coming to me late last year feeling very anxious about his grades. He had just completed his internship module and realised that his Grade Point Average (GPA) may not qualify him for a place in a polytechnic. We discussed ways he could try to improve his GPA in the

coming semesters and, more importantly, alternative plans if he was unable to progress to a polytechnic. When I listed employment as an alternative, Danny was adamant that he was not ready for the working world and that it was not a plausible option. He gave the same response when we explored the Work-Study Diploma (WSDip) offered by ITE as it required him to work and study simultaneously. The next few sessions saw us discussing further, getting him to revisit the positive experience he had during his internship and talking through the various forms of support available. I was delighted when he was able to walk through the process and have an attitudinal change towards employment. While he still finds open employment daunting, he was willing to explore the WSDip option and went on to meet with our Education and Career Coach to look into the entry requirements and application process. He also took a further step to help himself transition into new environments by applying for

a part-time job. Upon graduating from his Higher Nitec course in April and while waiting for his next course, he is now working part-time at a cinema, gaining valuable experience and lessons as an adult functioning in a working environment. In fact, during our last chat, he said he was starting to feel anxious again as his father is now asking him to buy a house!

While lack of awareness and stereotypes about the abilities of persons with special needs can lead to discrimination and reluctance to hire them, we may not realise that such attitudinal barriers may also come from the persons with disabilities themselves. For this reason, we often encourage students with special needs to start getting work experience at any opportunity presented as these experiences will give them a glimpse of the employment landscape and learn many soft skills which cannot be taught through a textbook. Sometimes though, the inertia may come from their parents. Hence, we also engage them in dialogue to explain and quote success stories for them to draw confidence from and allow their children to gain exposure to the employment sector.

Apart from the attitudinal barriers, other challenges to attaining inclusive workplaces include environmental barriers such as inaccessible workplaces; training barriers such as limited access and skills gaps; economic barriers such as cost of accommodations; and social barriers such as lack of mentors and social isolation. Addressing these barriers requires multifaceted efforts from employers, policymakers, educators, and society collectively.

BRIDGING GAPS ON THE GROUND

The Enabling Masterplan 2030, launched in August 2022, sees us working towards increasing the employment rate of persons with special needs to 40%. The government has developed many policies to aid in breaking the environmental and economic barriers, such as the Open Door Programme Training Grant and Enabling Employment Credit, as well as recognising effort from employers with the Enabling Mark awards. While the Enabling Academy was launched in May 2022 to address the training barriers, enlisting support from the ground may

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Raising Disability Awareness

Having a better understanding of the diverse needs of persons with special needs is the first step toward creating an inclusive environment. Last month, we held the SENsory roadshow at ITE College Central to provide all students with a deeper understanding of persons with special needs so they can better support their classmates and peers. Through the taster challenges and activities, students

experienced for themselves some of the challenges faced by persons with special needs. Instead of merely informing them about the different disability conditions, we wanted them to have the experiential element so that they would be able to empathise and have a better understanding of the hurdles persons with special needs may face every day. One of our students, Ben, has a hearing impairment and was helping at the booth while getting his schoolmates to listen to a hearing loss simulation. When asked if the simulation sounds similar to how it is for him, he said that while the simulation may not capture it a hundred percent, he was very thankful for the awareness raised.

At the dyslexia booth of the roadshow, I overheard a group of students telling their classmate that they finally knew how he felt in class, trying to overcome his difficulties as a person with dyslexia. Such is the impact we want as these experiences will stay with the person and hopefully lead them to embrace the differences. Especially for some disability conditions that may not be visible such as dyslexia or specific language impairment (SLI), having a moment in their shoes may help them be more understood and accepted in the workplace.

Maintaining Open Communication

At times, in our bid to be inclusive, we tend to think for the persons with special needs instead of letting their voices be heard. While our intentions may be good, we may be limiting them. We need to create a safe environment for persons with special needs to share their needs, concerns and preferences without judgement. When we listen actively and respond thoughtfully, they will feel valued and heard as they should, just like everyone else.

Earlier this year, my student, Burhan, was on an internship and it was nearing completion. We received a message from his supervisor that he had a meltdown and was unable to continue with the internship. It came as a surprise as prior to that, we had been receiving very good feedback from the supervisor and even Burhan had informed us that he was enjoying his internship experience. We immediately contacted him and arranged to meet in school the next day. Initially, he said that he was feeling tired as the fasting month just started and he had to wake up early for the pre-fast meal. Upon assuring him that our intent is just to support him and make sure things are good for him, along with the rapport that has been built, he finally shared that he was feeling overwhelmed as there was a group of new interns that had just joined the company. As he has autism, he was overstimulated by the sudden influx of new people in his workspace. In addition, his supervisor became busy with the new interns and he felt insecure that his support system was no longer available. We informed the supervisor and I was very impressed at how they responded to the situation. They arranged a meeting with Burhan, with us sitting in as well,

and acknowledged that the group of new interns joining them can be an overwhelming experience. They then asked Burhan how they could support him so that he could successfully complete his internship and assured him that this incident would not affect all the good work he had previously done during his attachment. Eventually, it was agreed that Burhan would be working from home for the last few weeks of the internship and that the supervisor would check in with him online regularly to ensure he felt supported. This episode showed me that when we adopt open communication which acknowledges the experiences and feelings of persons with special needs and allows their voices to be heard and valued, we can have a win-win outcome that benefits all parties.

Creating a Culture of Acceptance


When I first joined ITE about eight years ago, I was tasked to support Allan, a student with autism who was previously from a special school. Moving from a secondary school to an institute of higher learning may pose a challenge to all students in general. However, for Allan, it is a more intense transition as he was also moving from an all-inclusive environment in a special school to a mainstream setting in ITE. Apart from the size of the school campus, one major change is the class size which went from 8 to 40. When I went to observe him in class, I was fascinated by the way his lecturer approached him and the entire class. The lecturer informed the class that they are to see themselves as one family and that they are to accept differences and even look out for one another. By doing so, he encouraged a culture of acceptance within the class and established a form of natural support for Justin. I remember that Allan had a fixation on empty plastic bottles and if he gets his hands on an empty plastic bottle, he would kick it around, oblivious to his surroundings. This has gotten him into trouble a couple of times as the bottle he kicked hit others. So, the lecturer got the agreement of the class that no one was to bring any empty plastic bottles to class and if they were to see Allan around campus with one, they were to take the bottle away from him with his permission. The natural support provided for Allan from his lecturer and classmates aided him in successfully completing his NITEC

course, allowing him to progress on to a Higher NITEC course.

Other than establishing natural support for persons with special needs, we can also create a culture of acceptance through mindful accommodations that are tailored to the individual needs of the person and help in allowing them to work comfortably and be more productive. Examples of mindful accommodations include flexible work arrangements where a person with physical disabilities may have flexible start and end working times to facilitate their travel and avoid the crowd during peak hours, and the use of assistive technology like text-to-speech or speech recognition software to aid persons with language impairment or dyslexia. These mindful accommodations can boost the productivity and well-being of persons with special needs significantly, fostering a more inclusive workplace.

In conclusion, the principle of true inclusivity is to consider the person before their special needs and letting their voices be heard and valued. Instead of focusing on what persons with special needs cannot do due to their impairments, let us acknowledge and appreciate their unique talents and abilities. We all have a part to play in enabling inclusive employment and making it meaningful and sustainable. After all, creating an inclusive workplace not only benefits persons with special needs but also enhances workplace diversity, innovation, and overall productivity. ■

Note: All names of students have been changed to respect their privacy.



Aishah Mohd Said is a Learning Support Specialist at ITE College Central and has almost 20 years of experience working with students with a wide range of disabilities.

Altruism in Singapore

BY FARAHYN BANU MOHD HASRAT



Singapore, a nation known for its efficiency and pragmatism, also boasts a strong vein of altruism. From the ubiquitous “uncle” or “auntie” offering unsolicited advice on public transport to the robust network of grassroots volunteers, helping others seem ingrained in the social fabric. Is this generosity sincere or does self-interest lurk beneath the surface?

Altruism is defined as the act of helping others without regard for one’s self. However, altruism may mask what truly motivates a person. This raises the question of whether humans are capable of genuine altruism or whether all humans engaging in altruism are driven ultimately by self-interest. This in itself is a look into human nature at a fundamental level. This question is particularly significant within the sociocultural framework of Singapore which offers unique insights into the intersection between empathy and egoism.

Those who believe that altruism can be truly sincere suggest that helping out of the goodness of their hearts with no expectation of reward or personal gain is what drives acts of kindness and generosity. This perspective proposes that humans are driven by compassion and will instinctively take action if they witness another person’s suffering in order to alleviate the person’s distress because they feel for the suffering person. This emotional response compels people to act not for any reward whatsoever.

Daniel Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis supports this view, positing that empathetic individuals are inclined to engage in helping behaviours even when these actions entail significant personal cost¹. In Singapore, this can be seen in community-driven initiatives and grassroots movements that thrive on collective goodwill.

Singapore’s grassroots system offers a unique lens through which we can examine altruism. The network is a

hallmark of Singapore’s approach to governance and community building. Established in the 1960s, the system consists of numerous grassroots organisations (GROs), such as Citizens’ Consultative Committees (CCCs), Residents’ Committees (RCs), and Neighbourhood Committees (NCs). These organisations are tasked with fostering community spirit, addressing local issues, and providing assistance to residents².

Singapore’s grassroots system helps to nurture altruism by connecting citizens with their communities and encouraging social responsibility. Volunteers actively participate in RCs that organise events, address local concerns, and promote social cohesion. This system fosters a sense of belonging and cultivates a culture of giving back. At the heart of this system are volunteers who dedicate their time and energy to serving their communities. These individuals organise events, provide support to the needy and facilitate communication between residents and government agencies. This widespread volunteerism reflects a robust sense of empathy and community spirit, suggesting that individuals are motivated by a sincere concern for the welfare of others³. On the surface, their actions appear to be the epitome of altruism.

On the flip side, critics argue that altruistic acts are performed out of self-interest. This argument aligns with the theory of psychological egoism, which asserts that all human actions are ultimately motivated by personal benefit⁴. Many volunteers report a sense of fulfilment and joy from their activities, which aligns with the concept of “helper’s high,” a psychological state of euphoria experienced after performing a kind act⁵. When volunteers witness the impact of their actions on the recipient of their altruism, they experience an intrinsic reward, a psychological benefit that then reinforces altruistic behaviour. On top of the intrinsic reward, volunteers are perceived to have an improved social standing.

Acts of kindness can be perceived as investments that build social capital, creating a network of obligations and favours that can be called upon in times of need. These investments can provide access to opportunities, resources and support. While the initial act may appear selfless, the potential for future benefits adds a layer of strategic calculation to altruism.

Social recognition is a powerful motivator. In a close-knit society like Singapore, being seen as a helpful and engaged member of the community can enhance one’s social standing. Volunteers often receive public acknowledgment and awards, which can boost their self-esteem and social capital. With today’s social media age, this social recognition can become accelerated in a short span of time, further increasing a volunteer’s social capital. This opens doors for potential job prospects, being asked to sit on a board or even invitations to speak at certain platforms.

The motivations behind altruism in Singapore likely exist on a spectrum. At one end lies pure selflessness, driven by empathy and a genuine desire to help others in need. This intrinsic motivation is usually fuelled by moral principles and a sense of social responsibility. Some examples would be:

- A volunteer working with migrant workers might be deeply moved by their plight and will feel compelled to offer assistance based solely on a desire to alleviate their suffering.
- A volunteer working with terminally ill patients only to offer comfort and support.
- A teacher going above and beyond to help a struggling student succeed, motivated by a genuine passion for education and a belief in the student’s potential.

On the other end of the spectrum lies the strategic giver, whose primary

¹ Batson, C. (1991). *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

² Chan, H. (2020). *Civil Society in Singapore: Popular Initiatives and Government Policies*. London: Routledge

³ Ng, K. (2020). Community Response to COVID-19 in Singapore: Volunteering and Mutual Aid. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 61(19), 481-483.

⁴ Krebs, D. L. (1975). Empathy and Altruism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32(6), 1134-1146.

⁵ Post, S. G. (2005). Altruism, happiness, and health: It’s good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2), 66-77.

motivation is to achieve personal gain from helping others. This does not necessarily imply that the giver has malicious intent. Instead, one acknowledges that individuals often make practical decisions on how to allocate their resources, including their time and energy. Some examples would be:

- Someone mentoring a young professional might hope to gain recognition as a leader within their industry, while simultaneously helping the mentee develop their skills.
- A wealthy person establishing a scholarship in their own name for tax benefits and social recognition.
- A business owner donating to a local charity with the expectation of positive media coverage that could benefit their business.

In these cases, both self-interest and the drive to help others co-exist on the same scale. Strategic givers are often motivated by reciprocity in which they expect something in return for helping others. This can come in tangible forms such as being granted access to certain resources or intangible, such as enhancing one's social standing, as mentioned above. Volunteering can also be perceived as a strategy to advance one's career as it can allow for one to demonstrate leadership skills, build connections or even beef up one's resume.

Most real-world scenarios probably fall somewhere in between. While strategic altruism might seem less "pure" than genuine selflessness, it can still have a positive impact on society. Individuals are more often than not driven by a number of motives, not just one. A person might help a neighbour because they genuinely care about their well-being and also because they value having a good relationship with their neighbour. Understanding the altruism spectrum allows us to appreciate the complexity of human motivation and the different factors that influence altruism.

Singapore's religious diversity also plays a substantial role in shaping its unique brand of altruism. Buddhism, with its emphasis on compassion and helping

those in need, motivates acts of charity and volunteerism. Many Buddhist temples in Singapore operate soup kitchens and offer social services to the underprivileged. Similarly, Christianity's focus on love for one's neighbour and social justice inspires acts of service and advocacy. Christian organisations in Singapore run rehabilitation programmes and educational initiatives for the underprivileged.

The Hindu concept of *seva* (selfless service) encourages acts of charity and volunteering. Many Hindu temples in Singapore organise blood donation drives and provide free meals to the needy. Islamic principles of *zakat* (obligatory charity) and *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) motivate Muslims to contribute to social welfare programmes. Mosques and Muslim organisations in Singapore often manage food banks and offer financial assistance to low-income families.

Nonetheless, community expectations and social norms can pressure individuals to participate in volunteer activities. In some cases, there may be an implicit understanding that community involvement is a civic duty. This sense of obligation may be the motivation for one to perform altruistic acts, blending the desire to help others with the desire to conform to societal expectations.

The Singaporean government provides strong support for grassroots initiatives, recognising their importance in maintaining social harmony and addressing local issues. This institutional backing not only facilitates volunteer activities but also creates an environment where altruism is encouraged and rewarded. This effectively creates a cycle within the network of grassroots volunteers.


Altruism, whether driven by selfless motives or intertwined with self-interest, plays a vital role in the fabric of Singaporean society. The grassroots system exemplifies how structured volunteerism can foster community spirit and mutual support, benefiting both the givers and receivers.

The debate over whether altruism is actually selfless or intrinsically selfish highlights the complexities of human motivations. While some people may

act with true empathy and compassion, others may be motivated by intrinsic incentives or societal benefits. Altruism is a complicated phenomenon shaped by a combination of empathy, self-interest, and social dynamics.

Understanding the factors behind altruism in Singapore improves our understanding of human nature and how Singaporeans choose to give back to society. By understanding the different variables that motivate people to help others, we may create environments and policies that encourage and sustain altruistic behaviour, resulting in a more compassionate and cooperative society.

Ultimately, whether altruism in Singapore is an expression of pure selflessness or a nuanced form of self-interest, its impact on individuals as well as the community remains exceptionally positive. Accepting the duality of altruism gives a greater understanding of human behaviour and the ability for kindness to be manifested in any number of ways. ■



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THE ORANG LAUT IN SINGAPORE: PRESERVING AN INTANGIBLE MARITIME HERITAGE

BY QAMAR JANNAH FATEEN

Singapore's economy has undeniably flourished, with its economic development and rapid industrialisation. Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore's GDP growth has averaged about 7%, with an impressive peak of 9.2% in the first 25 years¹. This success can be attributed to a combination of strategic economic policies, a robust financial sector, a commitment to innovation and education and many more. Although known for its rapid development, one aspect that is often overlooked would be the rich intangible

culture that Singapore has to offer. One of the most fascinating yet often overlooked aspects of this intangible culture is the story of the Orang Laut (meaning 'sea people' in Malay) who once dominated the waters of Singapore. Now, the islands are currently used for different functions: recreational, petrochemical production, oil storage, and others. Although these are seen as positive developments by Singapore as it contributes to economic activities, such developments fail to consider the negative impact of these transformations — especially on the

Orang Laut community. Preserving the legacy of the Orang Laut is crucial for maintaining a connection to Singapore's historical and cultural identity.

This article delves into the rich intangible heritage of the Orang Laut and highlights the significance of their narrative, not just for the Orang Laut community, but for all Singaporeans. Before diving into that, let us deep dive into what intangible heritage means to Singapore.

¹ World Bank Group. (2024). Overview: The World Bank in Singapore. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/singapore/overview#:~:text=In%20the%20decades%20after%20independence,in%20the%20first%2025%20years.>

CULTURAL WEALTH AND ITS INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Singapore's intangible heritage encompasses a diverse array of traditions, practices, and expressions that form an essential part of the nation's cultural identity. From performing arts, festive events, to knowledge and culture, these intangible cultural elements are woven into the fabric of Singaporean society. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) theory highlights the importance of preserving these non-physical aspects of culture, recognising them as living traditions passed down through generations². ICH theory further stresses that the dynamic and evolving nature of culture underscores community participation³. Ultimately, ICH is expressed through processes, know-how, skills and abilities that are passed down through generations, which also includes associated objects and cultural spaces.

Hawker culture is deeply ingrained into the Singaporean culture, characterised by a combination of a variety of foods from different cultures coming together in one unique communal dining space. It serves as a gathering place for families and friends, offering an extensive variety of choices that makes it a go-to spot for those who are not able to decide what to eat. The food that originates from the food cultures of different ethnicities and cultures has over time evolved into distinctive local dishes that we love today, forming an important part of Singapore's food heritage.

Additionally, apart from its unique concept of community dining rooms and variety of food being available in one space, the hawkers and their skills are central to Singapore's hawker culture. It is important that the hawkers' knowledge, culinary skills and values are passed on through the generations. Although the younger generation respect and admire the hard work of hawkers, they understand that the benefits they enjoy as consumers come at the expense of the hawkers' physical well-being and monetary capital, which often discourages them from pursuing hawking as a viable career⁴.

The Orang Laut's in-depth knowledge of the sea and their navigational skills made them indispensable to local rulers in the past, playing a significant role in Malay politics as fishermen, traders, and even naval forces. The tribes of Orang Laut in Singapore would include the Orang Seletar (who lived in the mangroves near the Seletar River), the Orang Biduanda Kallang (from the Kallang River), the Orang Gelam (near the mouth of the Singapore River) and the Orang Selat (from the Southern Islands). Other Orang Laut communities can be found in Southern Peninsular Malaysia as well as Indonesia's Riau Islands.

Without new hawkers to replace old ones, hawker culture will certainly fade out in the future. Hence, one of the notable efforts made by Singapore would be the recent inclusion of Singapore's hawker culture in the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, mentioned that Singapore's hawker culture is a source of pride for Singapore, and it reflects the multiculturalism and living heritage that are an integral part of many Singaporeans' daily lives⁵. Having hawker culture on the list commits Singapore to protecting and promoting it, as the country would need to submit a report every six years to UNESCO to show the country's efforts in safeguarding and transmitting hawker culture to future generations⁶. This ensures collective effort will be put in to preserve the hawker tradition.

Singapore is also one of five countries that are involved in the multinational

nomination of *kebaya* — alongside Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand — to be inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH). The nomination was submitted back in March 2024. The five countries have worked together to celebrate *kebaya* (an upper garment traditionally worn by Southeast Asian women) as a form of shared history in Southeast Asia. The element of ICH facilitates dialogues, and the collaborative effort to submit the UNESCO nomination unites Southeast Asian communities (National Heritage Board, 2023).

Efforts in preserving intangible heritage relies on the younger generation to attain relevant skills, know-hows and its historical narrative. Subsequently, non-state and state actors have their significant role to play in achieving the implementation stage of preserving true narrative and culture. As much as we have shown love to the hawker culture

² Petronela, T. (2016). The importance of the intangible cultural heritage in the economy. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 39, 731-736. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(16\)30271-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(16)30271-4)

³ Liu, S. & Pan, Y. (2023). Exploring trends in intangible cultural heritage design: A bibliometric and content analysis. *Sustainability*, 15(13). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151310049>

⁴ Wong, D. & Ling, Y. Z. (2021). Understanding Singapore youth's perceptions on hawker culture. *Pioneer Road*, 1, 156-172.

⁵ Oh, T. (2020). Singapore's hawker culture clinches spot on Unesco's intangible cultural heritage list. *Today Online*. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapores-hawker-culture-clinches-spot-unesco-intangible-cultural-heritage-list>

⁶ Yong, C (2020). Singapore's hawker culture added to UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapores-hawker-culture-added-to-unesco-list-of-intangible-cultural-heritage>

and the traditional *kebaya*, the article shall turn back time, where the Orang Laut was still living on the islands — citing the earlier days when Singapore was first discovered by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819.

THE NARRATIVES OF THE ORANG LAUT

The Orang Laut in Singapore has a profound and intricate history in Singapore and the surrounding Malay Archipelago. Historically, they inhabited the coastal regions and islands, living as seafarers, fisherman, villagers, and traders before the arrival of the British in 1819. The earliest mention of Orang Laut residing in the islands of Singapore dates back in the 14th century. The Orang Laut's in-depth knowledge of the sea and their navigational skills made them indispensable to local rulers in the past, playing a significant role in Malay politics as fishermen, traders, and even naval forces. The tribes of Orang Laut in Singapore would include the Orang Seletar (who lived in the mangroves near the Seletar River), the Orang Biduanda Kallang (from the Kallang River), the Orang Gelam (near the mouth of the Singapore River) and the Orang Selat (from the Southern Islands). Other Orang Laut communities can be found in Southern Peninsular Malaysia as well as Indonesia's Riau Islands.

Unfortunately, as a result of Singapore's rapid industrialisation, the Orang Laut were displaced and forced to move to the mainland. Their settlement and villages were demolished, and they were relocated to public housing flats in various parts of Singapore, some of which include Telok Blangah, Kampong Bahru, Pasir Panjang and many more. The majority of the Orang Laut chose areas that are closer to the sea, to prevent themselves from getting homesick. Over time, they assimilated into the broader Malay community and have lost their unique language, which some have equated to losing their roots. Much like the future of Singapore's hawker culture, the younger generation are increasingly influenced by the allure of urbanised life and modern employment opportunities, causing them to increasingly move away from their

ancestral ways. This leads to a gradual eradication of traditional knowledge and practices. Moreover, the lack of documentation and formal state recognition of the Orang Laut's contributions to Singapore's history exacerbates the risk of their cultural heritage being forgotten by Singaporeans. Ultimately, it is important to acknowledge that Singapore's historical narrative contains many gaps that need to be explored. As previously mentioned, intangible culture bridges the past, present and future by ensuring continuity of culture preservation⁷. Nevertheless, through a number of ground-up initiatives, the descendants of Orang Laut are slowly reviving their traditions in the arts and culture.

Preserving the heritage of the Orang Laut requires a multifaceted approach, which include documentation of their oral histories, language, and traditional practices. Educational programmes and cultural initiatives can also play a vital role in raising awareness about the Orang Laut, fostering appreciation among Singaporeans. This is where relevant stakeholders come into play, where the descendants of Orang Laut can collaborate with academic institutions, heritage boards and relevant non-profit organisations.

Orang Laut SG is a compelling initiative that aims to preserve the culture of the Orang Laut through food. It began with an Instagram account aimed at sharing stories about their family who once lived in Pulau Semakau. They later started offering dishes, some of which are unique to the Orang Laut, for sale to the public, as a way of educating others about the culinary dishes of the Orang Laut and how they differ from the local Malay fare. They have recently expanded their community outreach through a collaboration with the National Heritage Board (NHB), National Library Board (NLB), and other ground-up initiatives — enabling more to learn about their community.

Back in 2023, Orang Laut SG organised an event called *Panggilan Anak Pulau* (translates to the Calling of the Islanders) — a gathering of former Southern Islanders and their descendants.

Supported by the Malay Heritage Centre, the event aimed to have conversations about the Orang Laut's heritage preservation, history, maritime traditions, as well as their maritime culture and traditional fishing techniques. Firdaus Sani, the founder of Orang Laut SG, recognises that even the making of *bubu* (fish traps) is considered a form of art, and as such, he hopes to still preserve what he can by documenting the stories around these traditions, and advocating for the Orang Laut's concerns to be heard. This includes calling for policies to ensure that they have access to their traditional fishing grounds, supporting sustainable fishing practices that can help maintain their way of life, and providing platforms for the Orang Laut to share their knowledge and skills with the broader community that can also promote cultural exchange and mutual respect.

Some notable efforts by other Orang Laut communities include those of the descendants of Tok Sumang. Tok Sumang was the founder of Kampong Wak Sumang, one of Singapore's earliest *kampung*s, which had been rebuilt after the Japanese Occupation ended. Tok Sumang had also restored Masjid Wak Sumang and other community spaces. It was during this time that the *kampung* took in refugees from villages in Johore. As the original inhabitants and descendants of Wak Sumang identified themselves as Orang Laut, the Johoreans identified themselves as Orang Darat (land people). Presently, descendants of Tok Sumang have gathered to share their family narratives in NLB's effort called the "Punggol Stories", which covers Punggol's history dating back to 200 years ago, when it was a thriving community before the land was reclaimed for urban development.

A similar example of how Singapore's history is documented through the descendants of such communities is the initiative started by Nor Syazwan bin Abdul Majid, or Wan, a descendant of the Orang Pulau community. He shares stories of the place his family once called home on Wan's Ubin Journal and holds free tours around Pulau Ubin's Malay *kampung*. The tour, named "Malay

⁷ Petronela, T. (2016). The importance of the intangible cultural heritage in the economy. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 39, 731-736. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(16\)30271-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(16)30271-4)

Documenting the efforts made by the descendants of the Orang Laut for this article highlights the dedication of various generations, coming together, in educating and raising awareness about the true identity of the Orang Laut. The ultimate goal is to ensure that Singaporeans recognise that islands such as Lazarus Island, Sentosa Island, and others are more than just recreational areas; they are a vital part of the heritage for our Orang Laut in Singapore. Each island had its own thriving community, with their own unique culture, people and heritage, not to mention, a vital part of Singapore's cultural tapestry.

Kampung Heritage Tour", brings participants around the Malay *kampung* as Wan shares old stories of the Orang Pulau Ubin's community, way of life, culture and heritage.

CONCLUSION

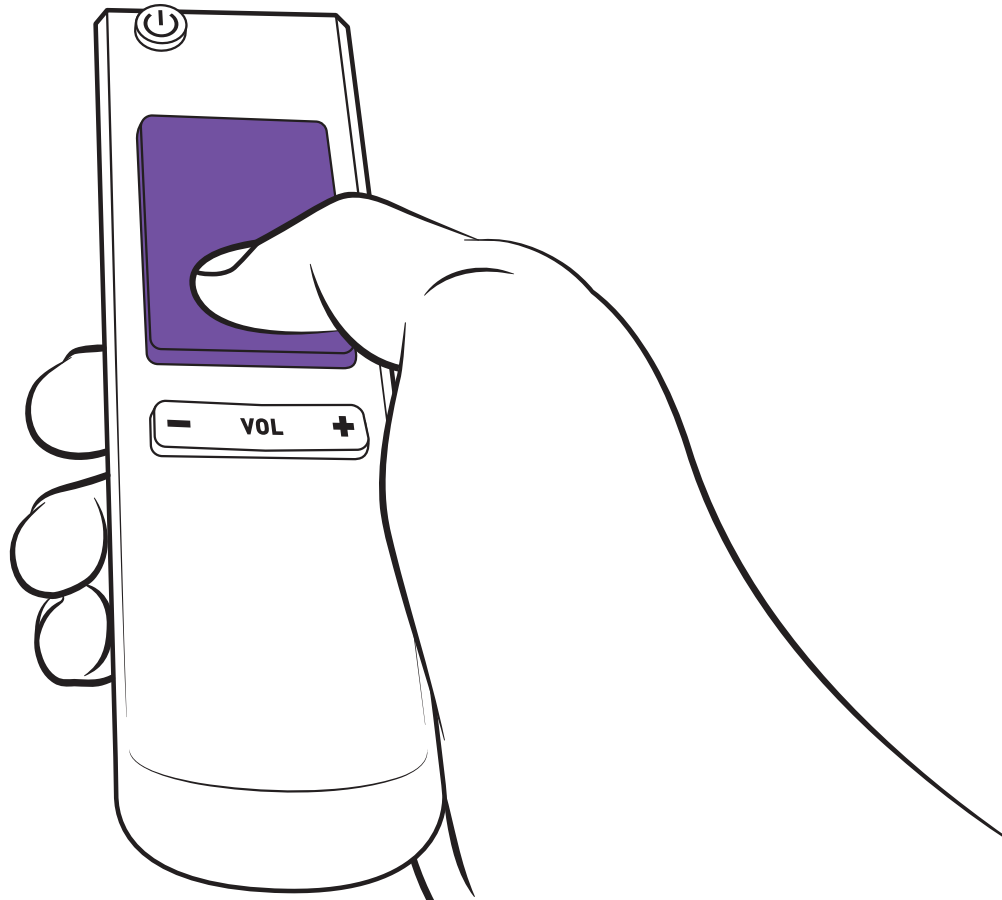
Documenting the efforts made by the descendants of the Orang Laut for this article highlights the dedication of various generations, coming together, in educating and raising awareness about the true identity of the Orang Laut. The ultimate goal is to ensure that Singaporeans recognise that islands such as Lazarus Island, Sentosa Island, and others are more than just recreational areas; they are a vital part of the heritage for our Orang Laut in Singapore. Each island had its own thriving community, with their own unique culture, people and heritage, not to mention, a vital part of Singapore's cultural tapestry.

Preserving this heritage not only honours the contributions of the Orang Laut to the region's history but also enriches the cultural diversity and tapestry of Singapore. As Singapore continues to evolve, it is crucial to remember and protect the stories and traditions of the Orang Laut, ensuring that their legacy endures for generations to come. By doing so, Singapore can celebrate its past while charting a course for a future that respects and values its diverse cultural roots. As we approach Singapore's 59th birthday, it seems like an opportune time for us to learn, appreciate and commemorate how these communities have contributed to our rich cultural heritage. ■

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State of Malay Television in Singapore

BY NUR IZZATIE ADNAN AND ILIYAS JUANDA



If you grew up in a typical Malay Singaporean household, chances are you grew up with Suria TV channel as a daily staple, playing in the background of your home. In the early 2000s when Suria was steadily burgeoning, drama series such as *Gelora*, *Cinta Bollywood*, *Anak Metropolitan*, *Erlin Montel*, or *Jeritan Sepi* were household programme names. Twenty years on, Suria boasts about 258,000 Malay viewers in Singapore, and lauds itself to be “the choice of Malay viewers in Singapore [that] offers

wholesome family entertainment with both local and regional programmes that are both enjoyable and educational”.¹ We contend that in today’s world, free-to-air television is competing with many other platforms such as Internet Protocol TV (IPTV), provided by Singtel TV and StarHub TV in the form of channels from Astro TV, or over-the-top (OTT) services, such as Netflix. This then requires a reanalysis of the claim of Suria being the channel of choice for Malay viewers. This article will then

be analysing the state of Malay media landscape in Singapore, with a specific focus on Suria as a case study.

WORD ON THE STREET: SURIA

There has not been new and updated literature on the state of Singaporean Malay media, or specifically Suria, in recent years. However, existing literature notes that Suria has a dual function – the first being to meet the television consumers’ needs and preferences, where programmes are to be entertaining,

¹ Suria. [n.d.]. Mediacorp.

educational, and informative. Secondly, Suria functions to form a national outlook and identity². In *The Role of Malay Media*, Halim (2016) expounded on how Suria has succeeded in these aims: “[Suria showcased] skilfully crafted dramas that become instant hits, fun and entertaining variety shows, staged with top local and international artistes [...] Suria has continued to progress and is capturing more eyeballs today.”³ Rahmat (2015) corroborates this by extensively elaborating on the various programmes that Suria has produced, that included more variety in genres such as drama, info-educational, children, variety and also culture.⁴ These genres are still reflected in Suria’s broadcasting schedule today.

When it comes to Suria’s audience, Halim (2016) posits that they hope to “reflect the affluent and new breed of Malay Singaporeans”. However, what exactly are we referring to when discussing Malay Singaporeans, let alone a new breed of them? Kwek (2012) explores the notion of an imagined audience, and the construction of Malays by Suria’s producers. Programming decisions at Suria will then be informed by this construction of Malays – by showcasing programming that is conservative and “safe”, and perhaps even using these programmes to change the mindsets of this imagined audience. Kwek then goes on to conclude how, through “the articulation of the Malayness of its audience, Suria’s producers had produced themselves as its distinct other, supposedly more progressive and open.”⁵ This is what this “new breed of Malay Singaporeans” is supposed to look like.

For the purposes of this article, we examined current programmes aired on Suria at the time of writing. While this may only be a snapshot in the larger broadcasting schedule of the channel, this is still a useful reference in looking at what is being offered by Suria as a channel, and determining whether it successfully serves its function as mentioned previously.

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OBSERVATION 1: NATURE OF ACQUIRED PROGRAMMES

As mentioned on the Suria website, the channel offers “wholesome family entertainment with both local and regional programmes that are both enjoyable and educational.” From this snapshot of the broadcasting schedule of the channel, we observe that the differences in nature of local and regional programmes offered are rather stark.

Local programmes aired offer less drama genres, instead focusing on informational and educational content from the variety or info-ed genre. Currently, Suria airs info-ed shows such as *Cuti Sini*, *Jejak Jenayah*, *Cantik Detektifor Haikal Nak Jadi Cef* that cover topics like travel, crime, beauty and wellness, and food, respectively.⁶ From here, we see that the channel seems to fit consumer’s

needs and preferences of entertaining, educational and informative content that span various subjects. This preference is also reflected in Suria’s 2023 Top 10 Local Programme Ranking, where the top eight programmes are of the variety genre, and the remaining ones are informational.

On the contrary, from the acquired programmes category, while there are also informative shows such as *Diari Seorang Traveller*, these are few and far between. Instead, we note that series such as *Jangan Menangis Cinta*, *Aku Titipkan Cinta*, *Bukan Syurga Pilihan* that are categorised as Drama/Romance are on air every weekday. On top of this, there are at least six other Drama/Romance programme series whose episodes are aired at a lesser frequency, that ranges from once a week to four times a week. These fall under the romance category as

² Rahim, A. (2016). Glimpses of 50 Years of Malay TV and Its Future. In *World Scientific eBooks* (pp. 347–355).

³ Halim, Z. (2016). The Role of Malay Media. In *World Scientific eBooks* (pp. 325–332).

⁴ Rahmat, M. (2016). Singapore Malay Media Industry Shines. In *World Scientific eBooks* (pp. 333–346).

⁵ Kwek, I. (2011). Malayness as Mindset: When Television Producers Imagine Audiences as Malay. In M. Mohamad & S. M. K. Aljunied (Eds.), *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* (pp. 195–216). NUS Press.

⁶ Channel Guide - Mewatch. [n.d.]. Mewatch.

their premise focuses largely on the coming together, or reconciliation, of two individuals. In the process, these series may also reflect various issues of the times – such as marital abuse, caregiving stress, or socio-economic disparities.

Not much has been shared about the processes of choosing Suria's acquired programmes to be aired, but we can surmise that these programmes may have had good ratings when aired on home ground, either through a good storyline or a stellar cast. This may translate to viewership when aired in Singapore. *Jangan Menangis Cinta* (2022) stars Amyra Rosli and Remy Ishak, who are wildly successful actors in Malaysia. Coupling the premise of travel and comedy, *Travelawak: Projek Bapak Bapak* (2023) stars Dato' Ramli MS, Dato' Jalaluddin Hassan, Jatt Ali, and Roy Azman, all of whom have been entertainment industry trailblazers in Malaysia.

With the second function of Suria that serves to form a national outlook and identity, there are also considerations of values imparted by these acquired programmes. This is reflected in the Malay Programme Advisory Committee's (MPAC) recommendations for Malay media in Singapore in 2006-2008, where they quote: "While the community should be exposed to diverse cultures and values, the broadcaster should be discerning in its selection, bearing in mind that foreign programmes may carry differing lifestyles and values to local Malay viewers."⁷ While MPAC has released limited reports that are available online, there are no other elaborations on this thinking and processes behind choosing acquired programmes.

OBSERVATION 2: (PERCEIVED) LACK OF SINGAPOREAN MALAY PROGRAMMES

As a channel dedicated to the minority, Suria has to contend with lower viewership when compared to Channel 5 or Channel 8, with local director Sanif Olek saying that minority-centric "films are perceived to have difficulty to sell

locally".⁸ This can be observed in the many Malay dramas that Suria acquires, as compared to the number of local dramas that pale in comparison.

This lack of Singaporean Malay drama programmes, specifically, can be viewed through two lenses, regulation and language. Regulation comes in the form of the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) and legislation in the form of the Broadcasting Act and Films Act, and no less than seven advisory committees. In their paper on censorship, Arts Engage (2010) quotes that despite consultation by the authorities, artists still felt that the "prevalence of censorship to be at odds both with the core values of democracy, equality, and justice ... and with Singapore's status as a dynamic, forward-looking society."⁹ Additionally, Olek noted that logistical barriers such as lengthy production timeframes and an "economically pragmatic" Singapore society make it harder for local ideas to hit the screen.¹⁰

From a language point of view, Kwek (2011) argues that the categorisation of local television channels, including Suria, along racial lines, instead of genres itself is "anything but innocent" and "needs to be problematised".¹¹ The very act of watching television programmes should be predicated on the form of the genre, such as sports, documentary, true crime – desired by the viewer, and not according to what their NRIC dictates. The need to showcase only standard forms of English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil languages also means that various dialects, and hence stories tied to those vernaculars, are restricted.¹² The prevalence of Bahasa Baku (a standardised spoken form of Malay) in local programmes, is a stark contrast to its colloquial and vernacular counterpart spoken in Malaysian programmes. Among the expectations laid out by the MPAC in its 2012 report include the "mindful" usage of the term "*gerek*", despite its informal everyday usage.¹³ Suria proclaiming itself to "being the heartbeat of the Malay community" while having to adhere to Bahasa Baku,

In their paper on censorship, Arts Engage (2010) quotes that despite consultation by the authorities, artists still felt that the prevalence of censorship to be at odds both with the core values of democracy, equality, and justice... and with Singapore's status as a dynamic, forward-looking society." Additionally, Olek noted that logistical barriers such as lengthy production timeframes and an "economically pragmatic" Singapore society make it harder for local ideas to hit the screen.

⁷ Report by the Malay Programme Advisory Committee 2006/2008. [2008]. in *Infocomm Media Development Authority*.

⁸ Olek, S. (2020). The Challenges on Making Malay-centric, Singapore films.

⁹ Arts Engage. (2010, June). *Arts Engage: Basic Position*. Retrieved June 22, 2024, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20160918203605/https://sites.google.com/site/artsendagessg/basic-position>

¹⁰ Olek, S. (2020). The Challenges on Making Malay-centric, Singapore films.

¹¹ Kwek, I. (2011). Malayness as Mindset: When Television Producers Imagine Audiences as Malay. In M. Mohamad & S. M. K. Aljunied (Eds.), *Malaya: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* (pp. 195-216). NUS Press.

¹² Olek, S. (2020). The Challenges on Making Malay-centric, Singapore films.

a form of language that the community itself does not see “as authentically indexing their Malay identity”, may also contribute to filmmakers and artists being less inclined to produce works as the result will only be a shadow of their desired productions and lived experiences.¹⁴

OBSERVATION 3: EFFORTS FOR INCREASED ENGAGEMENT AND VIEWERSHIP

The different eras of Suria reflect how it is keeping up with the ever-changing social Singaporean landscape. In recent years, we do observe concerted efforts to increase engagement and viewership among their target audience, to reflect the “affluent and new breed of Singaporeans”.

In a world where social media is ubiquitous, and allows for a lower barrier of entry to become a personality, the hype for local programmes used to find talent such as *Anugerah*, or *Anugerah Skrin*, have died down. Now, social media personalities seem to have a bigger pool of viewers than personalities in mainstream local media. Tapping on the followings of these social media personalities is predicted to increase viewership of mainstream programmes, as they would appeal to the youth who are users of these social media platforms. In *Sinar Lebaran 2024*, Suria tried to experiment by including media personalities from SGAG, a digital content producer in Singapore. Comedy has been a trademark of *Sinar Lebaran* since the yesteryears, and much feedback has revolved around the lack of that in this year’s programming. Many netizens have expressed that these personalities should not be involved in this particular comedy scene because mainstream television is vastly different from social media, where most of their content is situated.

There are also efforts in expanding to multiple online platforms, that each have their own value. Suria is on MeWatch, which is an online platform that provides free access to different local TV channels, and on-demand videos – that allows viewers to catch up on missed episodes,

or rewatch episodes whenever they desire. On top of streaming current programmes, be it local or acquired, MeWatch also boasts a comprehensive library of programmes from Suria’s yesteryears. This way, viewers can still consume local content at their own flexibility. On Instagram, the Suria channel goes by *@Mediacorp.Untukmu*, where they post snippets of current and upcoming shows to build awareness of their own shows while having an online presence. Suria has also explored transmedia productions, but their effectiveness remains to be reported. Further studies can be done to analyse the effectiveness of these various engagements on the Suria viewership.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Singaporean Malay produced television outside of Suria are few and far between as well, as noted by the constraints that we have expounded on previously. With this top-down approach of Singapore’s media landscape, and in order to capture a greater audience demographic who are interested Malay/Muslim stories, it is no wonder that independent production houses who do want to explore stories with unexpected storylines, especially pertaining to the Malay/Muslim community, have to branch outside of Singapore to do so.¹⁶ This can be seen in films like *La Luna* (2023), with an unexpected storyline, boasting a star-studded cast from Malaysia. This film was produced by Papahan Films (Singapore), Clover Films (Singapore), and Act 2 Pictures (Malaysia). In addition, we also note a number of Singaporean actors who do well in Malaysian television and film, who made the shift to be based in Malaysia to further their acting career.

After making these specific observations, here lies a few pertinent questions regarding the state of Malay television in Singapore: What does success look like for the general Singaporean Malay television scene, and is it different from what success looks like for Suria as a channel? For all the constraints that Singaporean Malay television has to work with, it seems that Suria is finding a comfortable

footing in the variety, educational and informative genres as a pathway to success. There is of course much to be explored and cultivated with regard to other genres. This success may translate to this statistic in the Media Consumer Experience Survey 2015 conducted by IMDA, that “on free-to-air TV, satisfaction was the highest with local programmes on CNA at 79.1%, followed by Vasantham at 78.4%, Suria at 76.5%.”. Additionally, with regard to why consumers do not subscribe to PayTV, we also observe that the percentage of people who stated that “*Mediacorp is enough*” dwindled from 57.7% to 47.6% from 2011 to 2013. This was before streaming services became ubiquitous, and these statistics may look vastly different now. On top of updating the study findings section on the IMDA website, there is a need for Suria to re-examine on-the-ground sentiments with regard to what the “affluent and new breed of Malay Singaporeans” want Singaporean Malay television to look like, in order to create a more robust television landscape in Singapore. ■

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¹³ Report by The Malay Programmes Advisory Committee 2010/2012. [2012]. in *Infocomm Media Development Authority*.

¹⁴ Abu Bakar, M., & Wee, L. (2021). Pronouncing the Malay identity: Sebutan Johor-Riau and Sebutan Baku. In *Multilingual Singapore: Language Policies and Linguistic Realities* (pp. 164–181). Routledge.

¹⁵ Ismail, H. (2024). Lawak ‘mendak’ Sinar Lebaran: Apakah silapnya? *BeritaHarian*.

¹⁶ Hsia, H. (2022). SG-MY movie “La Luna” wraps up production. *Cinema Online*.



FROM SINGAPORE TO BROADWAY: ZIZI MAJID'S JOURNEY IN CHAMPIONING MUSLIM WOMEN'S VOICES IN THEATRE

BY IRDINA AISYAH MOHD IMRAN

Home to some of the most renowned theatres in the world, New York City offers large-scale productions featuring top talent from across the globe. Shows like *Hamilton*, *The Lion King* and *Wicked* have become cultural phenomena, drawing not only audiences but also other figures in the global theatre industry, including 43-year-old Singaporean playwright Zizi Majid.

Determined to tell the stories of Muslim women, her plays often encompass the voices of the oppressed and those on the fringes of society. Zizi's decision to move to New York City was driven by a desire to progress her career on a much bigger stage, and a deep-seated passion for theatre that has fuelled her journey thus far. The city's promise of a dynamic and competitive theatre scene gave her and her husband a perfect initiative to challenge themselves. With New York's commitment to cultural diversity, continuous evolution and a vibrant community of collaborators, Zizi embraced the potential to challenge norms, tell impactful stories and leave a lasting imprint on the global stage.

Zizi shares her journey as a playwright from her work in Teater Ekamatra in Singapore to teaching playwriting and drama in context at Syracuse University with the *Karyawan* team.

Q: Can you tell us more about yourself and your family?

Zizi: I'm married with two children – my daughter is 14 and my son is 3. My husband, Izmir, is a scenic designer, and teaches scenic design at Syracuse University.

Q: What does your job entail?

Zizi: I am a playwright, and the work of a playwright is pretty self-explanatory – I write plays. When I've finished writing a play, I typically enter the play into competitions for development opportunities, as well as for fellowships and residencies. I use these opportunities to develop my work, to get my plays out there and build my resume. Because it is impossible to make a living as a playwright, I am also an adjunct professor at Syracuse University where I teach playwriting, drama in context and play analysis. Teaching keeps me connected to the craft

and holds me accountable to rigour and discipline. I also work at Syracuse Stage where I do meaningful work that engages the community through programmes offered by the theatre company.

Q: Why New York?

Zizi: Previously I was a playwright and theatre director in Singapore, where I was also the Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra. My husband and I wanted to go to graduate school for each of our disciplines, and the leading set designers and playwrights teach in programmes here in the US, so we came here. After graduation, we chose New York because it is where the most dynamic theatre scene is; and we wanted to challenge ourselves and see if we could compete in the most competitive theatre scene.

Q: How does working in the United States compare to working in Singapore?

Zizi: Basically, I moved from a small but very active theatre scene in Singapore to one that is huge and very competitive. The sheer amount of talent and number of people competing is astounding. Being a playwright in the US is very different from Singapore – it is much more competitive, and you must fight really hard to get your work read, developed or produced. One of the first questions I had to ask myself was how my artistic voice is relevant and how the plays I write can connect with the audience here while still being true to who I am.

I have found a passion for writing plays about Muslim women from the global diaspora, especially because the voices of Muslim women are often oppressed or misrepresented. I have written a play about a woman who was an interpreter for the US Army in the Iraq War, another about a female-fronted rock band in Syria during the Syrian Civil War and another about a group of female students in the Muslim Students Association of an Ivy League university. My faith is what connects me to the characters I write about. I do an incredible amount of research when writing a play, I am very mindful that I tell a story responsibly, and that the story I tell is authentic and well-grounded. My research spans historical writing, political op-eds, fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry.

Q: As a Muslim working in the US, were there any particular challenges you faced?

Zizi: I consider myself very lucky because in the theatre industry, people are very liberal, open and accepting. There is a great degree of respect for diversity and for the freedom of identity. Freedom of religion is a right that is taken very seriously here. While I was in graduate school, I worked part-time for a mortgage company and when I brought up the issue of having to pray during the workday, my boss made sure I had a comfortable place to pray. In my current day job, my supervisor is very supportive of me taking a few minutes to do my prayers during the workday. In both places, I am the only Muslim person on staff and my right to practise my religion is respected. For me, the challenge comes in the social aspects of life in the US. I have encountered quite a few what I'd call 'drive-by' racist comments from people I meet in stores, in public, etc. I think as women who are visibly Muslim, we are low hanging fruit – there seems to be a perception that we are timid and that you can say anything to us and get away with it. That said, there was only one instance where I felt physically unsafe; all other incidences were harmless – very hurtful, but physically harmless.



Throughout her career spanning two decades, Zizi celebrated many achievements including being awarded the Julia Miles Residency by WP Theater in New York City in 2023.



Zizi (second from the right) and her family

Q: Why did you choose to pursue a career as a playwright?

Zizi: I have been a playwright for over 20 years; theatre is my true love, and I cannot imagine doing anything else. Some highlights include being conferred the Young Artist Award in Singapore at the Istana by Mr Lawrence Wong (who is now the Prime Minister but then was the Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts). In October 2022, I was given a year-long playwriting fellowship with the Dramatists Guild Foundation, a prestigious fellowship in New York City (NYC) and was mentored by amazing playwrights whom I greatly admire. That was a true dream come true. In May 2023, I was awarded the Julia Miles Residency by WP Theater in NYC, a theatre company I love for their advocacy of women artists. I am especially proud that when I accepted the award, I spoke about the importance of telling the stories of Muslim women and our voice being invited to the table.

Q: What are some sources of inspiration for your works?

Zizi: I love going to museums and looking at works of art – I am always looking for inspiration from the work of great artists – especially when I’m just starting to formulate a play. Some playwrights I love are Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl, Quiara Alegria-Hudes, Young Jean Lee. I read a lot of poetry as well, and some poets I love are the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud

Darwish, Rainer Maria Rilke, Richard Wilbur, Tracy K. Smith, and Alice Notley. I’m also obsessed with Elif Shafak, the Turkish-British novelist. With the exception of poetry, I almost exclusively read women writers. I guess it is because so much of my work is focused on telling the stories of women – and I feel very strongly that there is still so much to be done to fight for women’s rights.

Q: What messages or emotions do you hope to convey to your audience through your work?

Zizi: I really hope that through my plays, people see the humanity and diversity of the experiences of Muslim women. I think often the experiences of Muslim women are pushed aside and belittled, so celebrating and telling their stories well is incredibly important to me.

Q: How do you spend your free time?

Zizi: We love hiking and camping as a family. Where we live in Syracuse, there are beautiful forests and mountains in the Adirondacks that is a short drive away, so we love to go and explore nature. We also like canoeing in lakes and ponds. However, because we are far up north, the water rarely gets warm enough to swim, so the one big thing I miss about Singapore and Southeast Asia is swimming in the sea. In the winter, because it snows a lot here, we go snow shoeing and cross-country skiing.

Q: What are your plans for your career in the future?

Zizi: To keep on writing plays about Muslim women and sharing these stories so that more people can hear our voices.

Q: Do you have any advice for the Muslims in Singapore who are interested in pursuing their career overseas?

Zizi: Just before I moved, my aunt gave me advice that I’ve held on to through the years. She hugged me and whispered, “*Jangan lupa aqidah*” (Don’t forget [your] faith). I think through all the challenges of the past ten years – starting from scratch and not knowing anyone; learning how things work – from how to take the bus to learning how to pay bills; facing racism – *aqidah* and trust in Allah has seen us through. We’ve moved five times in the ten years we’ve been in the US and each time, it is connecting to our faith in each new place that has helped us through. The truth is, regardless of what the media tells you, there are Muslims everywhere and more than that, there are people open and willing to embrace Muslims everywhere. You just have to be true to yourself, hold yourself up with dignity and people will respect you for it. ■

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Western classic texts like those mentioned above are often discussed at great length for their astute observations about the human condition; however, the global literary canon also contains pockets of revolutionary *transnational* literature. These perspectives are revolutionary because they engender much-needed conversations about multiculturalism as they quietly subvert conventions lining genre, stylistic expression, and even plot structure, and because they delve into the lives of the common man in a way that sheds condescension in exchange for heightened empathy. Alfian Sa'at's *Corridor* is a transnational work that embodies the trials and tribulations of ordinary individuals residing in Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. Through the minutiae and ennui of their day-to-day lives, we uncover extraordinary epiphanies about the complexities of feeling lost in a society prioritising success over connection.

Book Review:

ALFIAN SA'AT'S *CORRIDOR*

BY AZEEM SULEHRI

"Behind these fantastic stories however, was the faint hope that somehow, I had found someone who shared something in common with me." (Duel in Corridor)

The elusive human pursuit – or rather, yearning – for happiness has long occupied the literary imagination. From Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, existential anxieties plague individuals across the societal spectrum. The search for meaning in an indifferent world can manifest across human life idiosyncratically, but the overall feeling of being lost, wanting more, and dreaming for a just world carries an unshakable universality spanning continents. It is in these stories that we often realise literature is a mirror; a conduit that reassures us we are not alone in our desires, or conversely, our struggles.

This review of *Corridor* will explore the themes presented by Sa'at's stories. Born in 1977, Alfian Sa'at is a renowned Singaporean playwright, poet, and author whose incisive, empathetic portrayals have significantly contributed to Singapore's literary and theatrical landscapes. His works often tackle themes of identity, belonging, and societal norms, providing a voice to marginalised communities. *Corridor*, published in 1999, is a testament to his ability to capture the nuances of everyday life by showcasing a deep sensitivity to Singaporean vernacular and socio-cultural dynamics. An evocative collection of short stories, *Corridor* offers a glimpse into subdued yet significant turning points in the lives of ordinary people.

Across twelve short stories, Sa'at's voyeuristic, intimate vignettes of Singapore's working class allows the reader to see the world with a new set of eyes – eyes that have experienced tremendous amounts of pain and alienation on the margins of a rapidly modernising society. Moreover, his conscious use of Singlish and cultural references from the 90s compel the reader to understand the world of each protagonist on *their* own terms, levelling the playing field by acquainting us with the lexicon of the sidelined "other."

Though largely drawing from the experiences of the working class, *Corridor* does not confine its characters to a specific demographic; instead, Sa'at presents diverse individuals, each with their unique backgrounds and struggles. Their stories, in distinctive, highly individualised manners, crystallise the resilience and vulnerability of the human spirit: "along the city's corridors, people are haunted by lost loves, childhood trauma, and a longing to be free" (from *Corridor's* book description). Across the stories, individuals navigate poignant episodes: a man re-learns the difficulties of falling in love again after a divorce; a young boy feels entrapped and seeks to escape a problematic relationship with an older man; a down-on-their-luck married couple wins holiday tickets to Australia, only to discover that the prize was a marketing ploy.

Sa'at's slices of life are elegiac and sincere, and perhaps, they begin to hold even more potency when readers realise that not all twelve stories necessarily offer definitive endings. In *Duel*, the story of an insomniac's fascination with an eternally lit apartment offers no resolution; instead, we engage with the protagonist's mini-experiments and inane but provocative thought patterns. Life too, much like Sa'at's book, does not always offer neat resolutions to our pain or joy. It is unpredictable and sometimes even anticlimactic. The endings of each story are abrupt, but readers eventually learn to make peace with the presumed "pointlessness" of each tale. Sa'at encourages us to marinate in the fact that circumstances might remain in stasis, but feelings are in constant flux. He urges us to make peace with uncertainty.

In line with the above, *Corridor* also explores the notion of happiness and its tenuousness in Singapore, a society arguably obsessed with progress and capitalist notions of success. Some characters even express frustration with the high-strung, fast-paced living:

"At that moment I ask myself why the whole world has to pretend" (*Bugis*)

"In the midst of a bustling city, it is easy to feel like a solitary figure in a long, empty corridor." (*Orphans*)

"Class divides are the invisible corridors we navigate every day, often without realizing it." (*Pillow*)

The HDB dwellers in this anthology – students, factory workers, housewives – experience a sense of hopelessness within the densely populated urban landscape of Singapore, described as "breathing with a life of its own, inhaling dreams and exhaling despair" in *Disco*. The story *Orphans* captures this sense of despair through the interactions between a married couple (Karen and Teck How) as they navigate through their differing perspectives on happiness and aspirations. As the narrative unfolds, Karen's inner conflict and yearning for a deeper connection become evident. Her reflective moment, scanning the horizon for an aeroplane in the sky symbolises her search for hope and a sign of change amidst the urban sprawl.

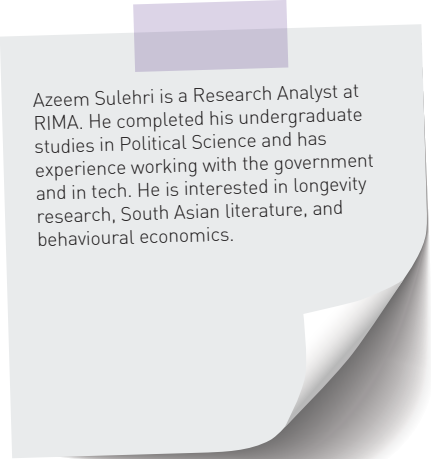
Sa'at brings a unique perspective to the exploration of identity in Singapore. His stories often focus on the intersections of race, gender, and ethnicity, and how individuals navigate social, economic, and religious expectations in this light. In *Bugis*, the narrator constantly questions her friend's newfound display of piety with the *tudung*. In *Umbrella*, the underachieving narrator Hafiz, with his humble background and predominantly Malay-speaking parents, attempts to use an American accent when speaking to his mathematics tutor. This act of code-switching reflects his internal struggle with identity and acceptance. Similarly, in *Winners*, Shirley's inability to continue a telephone conversation highlights the barriers faced by those who do not conform to societal norms by prioritising English fluency. Beneath the glamour of Singapore's economic prosperity, all characters constantly negotiate recognition in spaces where they are otherwise merely considered numbers and statistics, and where their worth is predicated upon their conception as either success stories or underachievers in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

The book's physical spaces also play a crucial role in shaping the characters' experiences and emotions. Sa'at masterfully uses architecture and space to symbolise the characters' internal landscapes. The titular story, *Corridor*, explores the harmony and distrust between neighbours in HDB flats. Corridors, officially lauded as "common spaces" for Singaporeans to share and

connect, are painted with a tinge of cynicism. A murder in the corridor becomes a powerful metaphor for the underlying tensions and fractured relationships in the community. These spaces, meticulously planned by the state, become arenas for moments of intimacy, longing, anger, and disenchantment.

The anthology captures the essence of Singapore's past, including the old Bugis Street which was once a vibrant hub for the transgender community, but has now become a sanitised version of its former self. These references serve as reminders of the drastic evolution of urban life in Singapore, highlighting the transformative shifts that have reshaped its social and cultural landscape. Through these contrasts, Sa'at subtly hints at what has been lost beneath the city's polished façade.

Sa'at's work challenges us to look beyond cultural and geographical boundaries and recognise the shared aspirations and discontents that unite us all. One of the most profound realisations could be from *Video*, where a typical Singaporean character buys chestnuts before visiting her mother's house. In Malay, chestnuts are also called *buah berangan*, and *berangan* roughly translates to the act of dreaming or daydreaming. Dreaming carries a sense of the unattainable but is also lined with hope and fantasy. So much of human life is defined by a sense of longing and loss for the unattainable but *Corridor* does not berate us for dreaming, and instead, points out the externalities that perpetuate unattainable thinking and goals. ■



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