

Issues of Inequality and the Political Economy in 1990s Singapore: A Marxist Reading on Alfian bin Sa'at's "Birthday"

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Abstract

This research closely reads a short story by Alfian bin Sa'at entitled "Birthday" in relation to the historical narrative and the political economy of 1990s Singapore using the perspective of Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary criticism. The result of this study shows 1) that Alfian challenges a portion of the historical narrative of Singapore's political economy in the 1990s at which ideology works to justify the power hierarchy, yet altogether highlights the other portion of it to shed some light on the oppressed; 2) that challenging and, at the same time, highlighting the historical narrative are Alfian's strategy to endorse his political commitment while not being openly partisan; and 3) that Alfian carefully configures the literary form and content of his work – through his use of multilingualism and Singaporean English – to advocate his idea of the future of Singapore and – through his use of simple sentences that build a stream-of-consciousness plot – to underline the complex social realities whereby issues of inequality (gender, racial, and class) are correlated. This study implies that the use of Marxist literary criticism in reading a literary work from a formerly colonized country cannot neglect the traces of neo-and/or colonial experiences since colonialism itself, following Marx and postcolonial theorists, is a more acute form of capitalism. However, this paper finds that, different from the usual postcolonial reading, the Singaporeans (its capitalists and government) are as complicit as the Western neo-colonial enterprises for the inequalities and oppression happening in the region.

Keywords: Marxist literary criticism; political economy; postcolonialism; inequality; Alfian bin Sa'at

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Introduction

It has been a general agreement among literary scholars that 'serious' literature of modern Singapore deals with a dialectical grappling between the issues of individual existence (on identity, the sense of belonging, intersubjective relationship, etc.) and the social realities (the power hierarchy governing economic, sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious structure) that situate them (Holden, 2013; Zhang, 2015; and Gui, 2017). This tension results in the sense of "not being at home" (Tay, 2011); or, in Homi Bhabha's (2004) term, of "unhomeliness." The recent article aims, in general, to show how this is also the case with the works of Alfian bin Sa'at by focusing only on his short story entitled "Birthday" which was first published in his short story anthology, *Corridor* (1999).

As a contemporary author famous for his plays and poems—exquisite works that have won him several prestigious literary awards—Alfian bin Sa'at was born into a Moslem Singaporean family of Minangkabau, Javanese, and Chinese Hakka descent on 18 July 1977 in the city of Singapore. He has gained international fame as an author as his works being translated into German and Swedish; widely read in London, Zurich, Hamburg, and Munich; and being on the reading list of the University of London, the University of New York, and the West Virginia University (Sin, 2016). However, in both Malaysia and Singapore, Alfian is considered controversial. On the one hand, as he himself said in an interview reported by Bahrawi (2016), he is a vehement political writer and has, throughout his works, criticized the socio-political issues of his country; but, on the other hand, he grapples to connect issues of sexuality with his religious upbringing ("A Moment with...", 2012; Bahrawi, 2016).

Despite gaining the status of a celebrated author, Alfian's works are still understudied. Previous studies on his works can be categorized into two: those following Poon (2016), insisting that the central issue in Alfian's works is the religious discrimination of Moslem Singaporeans, and those following Bahrawi (2019), arguing that it is the racial discrimination of Malay Singaporeans that

occupies him. Both of these studies, different as they are, share one basic similarity: they believe that the discrimination (either racial or religious) has something to do with the neo-and/or colonial experience of Singapore. These kinds of reading, although having some truths in themselves, risk reducing the complex phenomenon of discrimination by projecting the blame into the West; they neglect to look carefully and closely at the enigmatic yet deeper structure from which the phenomenon of discrimination emerges.

But what is this structure? Or perhaps the question one should more precisely ask: how can we approach this structure? There are many ways to approach it with each way leading to a different appearance (in a Hegelian term; see Hegel, 2019) of deep structure. Social psychology, for example, will lead one to discover the unconscious structure of a certain community, as done by Chew (2018), from which one could diagnose the cause of racism. This paper, however, uses Marxist approach postulating that any practice of discrimination is conditioned by what Karl Marx calls the economic base; that the phenomenon of discrimination is just the tip of the iceberg reflecting a much more complex social reality intertwined with economy and politics—a reality that changes from time to time in accordance with the change of class formation. This study, hence, hypothesizes that the discrimination (racial, religious, and/or others) that Alfian depicts in his works is the result of his reflection of the Singaporean political economy. To test this hypothesis, this article aims to scrutinize the particular types of discrimination that Alfian depicts in his "Birthday" and how they correspond to the political economy of 1990s Singapore.

Methodology

This article specifically used Terry Eagleton's (2002) interpretation of Marx to analyze Alfian's "Birthday." His theorizing has the advantage of not being reductive the way the Orthodox Marxists (e.g. El Guabli, 2020) and the Anarchists (e.g. Clark, 2018) do; and in the fact that its domains of study are specific, so that this research can focus on specific issues without getting distracted by, for instance, psycho-social analyses the way

Freudo-Marxists (e.g. Sanka, 2019) do. In interpreting Marxism as a tool for literary criticism, Eagleton focuses on four domains: 1) literature's alignment with history; 2) the configuration between literary form and content; 3) the author's political commitment; and 4) the author's attitude as a producer. For the sake of brevity, this paper, however, deals only with the first three.

The relationship between literature and history should be looked at from the configuration between the base and the superstructure situating it. Consisting of productive forces (i.e. labor power and the means of production) and relations of production (i.e. social, economic, and technological relationships in a workplace), the base is the basic social reality from which the superstructure—consisting of the institutional systems (e.g. the government, the school, the military) and the collective consciousness (e.g. arts, religions, philosophical ideas)—emerges. From the superstructure, ideology, which are certain forms of social consciousness, emerges to preserve the power hierarchy. Meanwhile, Marxists view art and literature, as parts of the superstructure, as “not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world, which is the social mentality or ideology of an age” (Eagleton, 2002, pp. 5-6).

It must be noted that the superstructure is never a mere reflection of the base. In his “Letter to Joseph Bloch” (1973), Friedrich Engels explicitly denies any arguments saying that the relationship between the two is always mechanical (i.e. the superstructure is always determined by the base). He explains that any social realities of the superstructure simultaneously reflect upon and react back to the economic base. In other words, the superstructure—despite being conditioned or contextualized by the base—has a certain degree of independence that can always influence and even change the base. Now, as the relationship between the base and the superstructure is always dialectical, so is the case with that between art and ideology: art

and literature can challenge ideology and hence be the agent of historical change.

Meanwhile, on the configuration of literary form and content, Marx believes that any literary works should reveal a unity between the two. But Eagleton (2002, p. 20) interprets this unity as Marx's suspicion “of excessively formalistic writing”. He argues that “mere stylistic exercises led to ‘perverted content,’ which in turn impresses the ‘stamp’ of vulgarity of literary form (ibid.)”. Hence, the relationship between literary content and form should always be dialectical despite, as what happens in between the base and the superstructure or in between ideology and art, the latter is conditioned by the former. But then again, the form “reacts back upon it in a double-edged relationship (ibid.)”.

Lastly, on the author's commitment, Marx and Engels always judge the quality of a literary work based on certain political predilections. Yet, they do not endorse the formula of explicit political correctness being the primary benchmark of literary aesthetics. Engels explicitly states, in his “Letter to Minna Kautsky” (1973), that to be openly partisan in writing is never an effective and efficient strategy for an author to challenge the ideology. Only in an indirect way, through metaphor and metonymy (which are the mechanisms of the dream-work in psychoanalysis), for instance, can a revolutionary literature work effectively since what it aims is to raise class consciousness (to bring forth the unconscious impulse and desire to the surface; to gaze the real that is suppressed by the symbolic order). In this sense, Marxist literary criticism originally rejects the reflectionist theory stating that literary works should teach certain political attitudes toward social realities as explicitly as possible.

This paper implemented Eagleton's Marxist literary criticism to reads its primary source of data, Alfian's short story “Birthday”. After explaining the historical narrative of the political economy of 1990s Singapore, this study traced in detail the issues of inequality in Alfian's short story and how they challenge, complement, or correspond to the narrative. The similarities and the disjunctions between

the story and the historical narrative provided this article with insights into Alfian's political commitment. Lastly, this research scrutinized how the configuration of form and content in "Birthday" can further explicate Alfian's stance.

In addition, this article used secondary data to elaborate its findings. They are previous studies exploring Singaporean political economy in the 1990s, articles on Alfian bin Sa'at, and scientific works on Singaporean literature.

Results and Discussion

Before discussing the results of Marxist reading on Alfian's "Birthday", it is crucial to look at the historical development that Modern Singapore had undergone in and prior to the 1990s. The following section deals exactly with the general description of 1990s Singapore's political economy and how the country had come to that point.

1990s Singapore: History and Political Economy

There are at least three characteristics of Singapore that need to be highlighted in the beginning of our discussion: 1) Singapore (and the majority of Southeast Asian countries) were the victims of Western colonialism; 2) prior to being colonized by the West, the region consists of some local and independent kingdoms trying to conquer each other (thus nationalism is a relatively new concept); and 3) the geographical location of Singapore has invited many ethnicities other than the West to settle around the region. As the last characteristic is perhaps the most important for our discussion, it must be noted that Orang Laut or the sea gypsies (arguably the natives of the region), has settled for a long time side by side with the Chinese before Thomas Raffles came (Swee-Hock, 2012). Additionally, when William Farquhar took over the region that had become the new free port of Great Britain, foreign traders such as the Bugis, the Peranakan Chinese, and the Arabs flocked to the region. Lastly, with Singapore later being grouped (together with Penang and Malacca) by the British East India Company as the Straits Settlement, a residency and subdivision

of the Presidency of Bengal, in 1826, many Indians came over to the region (Chew & Lee, 1991). Thus was the origin of the multiracial, multicultural Singapore.

As a nation, although its independence was established gradually thanks to the echoes of "*Merdeka!*" spreading all over the region after the Japanese defeated the British, Singapore achieved its complete independence in March 1957 when Britain finally granted Singapore its internal self-government. Singapore would later have its own citizenship, a Legislative Assembly whose seats were expanded to fifty-one which are voted entirely by its citizens, a Prime Minister who was able to control all aspects of the government except defense and foreign affairs, and Yang-Di-Pertuan Negara as the leader of the state (Chew & Lee, 1991). In the 1959 election, the People's Action Party (a left-wing party; abbreviated as PAP) won the election—despite being condemned by the British at that time—giving its leader, Lee Kuan Yew, the privilege of being the first Prime Minister of Singapore. As a consequence of this political evolution, out of fear of the party's stance on communism, many private businesses shifted their headquarters from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur; but, thankfully, the PAP successfully handled the situation by embarking on several programs to increase the nation's economic and social development.

However, the PAP believed that the future of Singapore was to merge with Malaysia. The reasons for this are: 1) the strong historic and economic ties between the two; 2) Singapore's lack of natural resources; and 3) the rise of crucial problems that Singapore faced such as the declining *entrepôt* trade and the fast-growing population needing jobs and lands to settle on. Therefore, on 16 September 1963, both countries, including North Borneo and Sarawak, merged (Chew & Lee, 1991). But, the union between the two was rocky from the start and would give rise to a series of racial disasters between the Malays and the Chinese (and non-Malay) Singaporeans as an effect of the infamous Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia promulgating discriminatory policies that benefited the former in social, political, and financial sectors over the latter. The tension culminated in the 1964 Race Riot on 21

July, killing twenty-three people and injuring hundreds. Following this tragedy, on 9 August 1965, the union was completely broken off and Singapore became the Republic of Singapore with Yusof bin Ishak as its first president. These successive tragic events can be seen as the cause of racial disparity between the Chinese and Malay Singaporeans in contemporary Singapore, with the former now being the dominating group over the latter.

Because of the failure of the union between Singapore and Malaysia out of racial issues, the Republic of Singapore insisted on establishing a new nation that is inherently and vehemently multiracial, as Lee Kuan Yew himself says:

We are going to have a multiracial nation in Singapore. We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation, this is not a Chinese nation, this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his [or her] place. Equal. Language, culture, religion. And finally, let us, really, Singaporeans, we unite, regardless of race, language, religion, culture. (cited by Pak, 2021, p. 4).

Hence, the government has created several laws to prohibit racist attitudes. The most famous one is perhaps the Sedition Act of Singapore which prohibits any ill wills, remarks, and gestures that might offend other races and social classes in the country. Another one is the Penal Code Chapter 224 which controls specific offences for racial remarks: “[o]ffenders will be either fined, imprisoned for up to three years, or both” (Chew, 2018, p. 2). However, even with this strict regulation, racism has not yet vanished in the region. According to Pak (2021), the multiracialism that was dreamed of by Yew is not actually a celebration of multiculturalism *per se*, but a political mandate given by the government to impose a multicultural environment; which can also be seen as, *faut de mieux*, a revenge policy made by the Chinese Singaporeans to the Malay-dominated Malaysia because of the bitter experiences during the union. On this, I am tempted to argue that the establishment of the laws concerning racial attitudes has led Singaporeans, especially the Chinese ones, into an externalization of the super ego (as opposed to the internalization of the super

ego; see Žižek, 2006) that can result in the figuration of the Other (in this case, the Malay Singaporeans) as someone whose characteristics appear in the unconscious structure of the Chinese Singaporeans as lazy, filthy, disgusting, even dangerous, and (paradoxically) racist (even if they are necessarily not) while denying the fact that it is them who are the racist ones. This unconscious racism emanates in two major realities: a reluctance to discuss racial issues (or an insistence that there is no racial inequality in the region; thus the multicultural atmosphere feels very superficial) and a preference for meritocracy that favors the Chinese Singaporeans (Chew, 2018). That being said, the very formula for multiracialism of Singapore, the CMIO framework (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other—a framework which is the legacy of the British; see Goh & Holden, 2009) actually preserves the very practices of racism in the country. This unconscious racism has also affected some crucial domains in the social institutions of the nation, especially the education (Moore, 2000; Khoo & Lim, 2004) and economic ones (Low, 2001).

As for its political economy, according to Cahyadi *et al* (2004), in general, there are three categories of Singapore’s strategy: 1) the government’s strategic role; 2) the mobilization of human capital; and 3) the infrastructure development. In the 1960s, the strategy that the country took was to import highly capitalistic Western ideas by asking the United Nations to send a team of economic advisors that would be led by a Dutch industrialist Albert Winsemius. This resulted in the establishment of the Economic Development Board (EDB) in 1961 whose main purpose was to attract foreign capitals to enter Singaporean markets. The EDB successfully brought Western economic powers (especially the US) and some Japanese firms to enter the country’s markets by developing the Jurong Industrial Town and creating the Economic Expansion Incentive Act, giving the foreign corporations tax benefits up to five years – is this not a different form of Western colonialism practiced in the newly so-called independent state of Singapore?

Although those strategies gave fruition to the country's economic development in the early 1970s, there were crucial problems faced by the EDB: the unemployment rate was about 10% of the population, skepticisms over the British withdrawal from the region, the Indonesian policy of confrontation, and the Singapore-Malaysia separation. The EDB solved the problems by 1) extending the tax benefit up to ten years; 2) nationalizing private companies such as the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), the Singapore Airlines (SA), and the Sembawang Shipyard; 3) extending the use of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) for housing purchase and medical benefits; and 4) surprisingly (or perhaps not) forcing labor unions to merge into the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) to control employment and wage and to attract more foreign corporations. All these mark the rise of Singaporean capitalists to dominance, after a deal with the Western enterprises, over the region and its dominated groups.

Of course, what follows from those strategies was none other than the protests over the workers' wages culminating in the early 1980s. In addition, the emerging economic markets of Singapore's neighbors made it no longer afford in becoming a market of low-wage workers anymore. Therefore, the EDB started to focus on converting the labor forces from un- and semiskilled labors into skilled and professional ones by establishing the National Computer Board (NCB) for opening the path toward what Low (2001) calls the knowledge-based economy (KBE) and the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution. The government also strove to build new infrastructures and continued giving tax incentives and benefits to multinational and pioneering companies; making Singapore the leading country in Southeast Asia in economy.

In the 1990s, to further accelerate the KBE and ICT revolution, the government established higher schools like the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The EDB also initiated the Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) triangle to relocate Singaporean manual-production-based companies to the nearby areas of Johor, Malaysia and the islands

of Bintan and Batam in Riau, Indonesia. The reason behind the EDB's initiation of SIJORI follows Pang's (2009) logic of creative labor: creative or intellectual labor, can only replace the manual one as the main productive forces in the region only if the manual productive activities are done in a different society. In other words, for Singapore to completely adopt the KBE scheme, the country needs to relocate its manual productive activities to different regions outside its own. Hence, it can be said that after gaining enough capital for its own, Singapore made use of its neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia, to fulfil its needs for manual labor for it to become a new Western enterprise.

In the late 1990s, to come to terms with the 1997 crisis the EDB was forced to adopt different strategies. They are 1) privatizing some Nation-owned companies, 2) cutting salaries and wages (Chong, 2007), and 3) importing low-wage labor from foreign countries (Low, 2001). The ICT revolution was continued after the crisis had ended to further expand the scope of the country's KBE (Vu, 2013). In so doing, the Republic of Singapore adopted a politico-economic strategy that Chong (2009, p. 952) calls "liberal economics with a mercantilist tinge" by widening its doors for the free market while maintaining a strong level of influence to control it. It also has developed a narrative that Singaporean citizens are always driven by a survivalist need, "an insatiable hunger for progress" (Bahrawi, 2019, p. 504), as reflected by Lee Kuan Yew's memoir *From the Third World to First* (2000) whose title serves as the evidence of what I have argued in the previous paragraph, that Singapore strove to be the new capitalistic Western enterprise. This argument is supported by Dass' findings (2014) stating that Singapore opened itself the most for globalization among other Southeast Asian countries by aligning "its foreign and domestic policies to maximize growth" (p. 293) and adopting a kind of economic-based curricula.

Although they had led Singapore to economic and political success in the global contestation, these ambitious policies have led the country to the crisis of cultural identity as the result of sacrificing its people for the neo-colonial gods residing in the West and using its

neighbors as the sources of manual labors. Furthermore, because of its complex (and arguably superficial) idea of multiracialism as well as its complex history of inequality, its figures on literary, social, and humanism (including Alfian bin Sa'at) have struggled to search for the idea of nationalism and cultural identities that could transcend the racial and religious boundaries (Patke & Holden, 2010; Tay, 2011). Sections that follow show how Alfian in "Birthday" reflects upon the historical narrative of the political economy of 1990s Singapore just discussed and how the narrative closes its eyes to the issues of inequality.

The Oppressed Women's "Birthday"

Alfian's "Birthday" follows a story of a female Malay Singaporean factory worker named Rosminah, a mother of two children, who despite being married to her husband, Awang bin Razali, has neither felt happy being with him nor actually been in love with him.

In the quiet of the kitchen, the refrigerator hums soothingly. Rosminah fixes herself some orange squash and settles into one of the kitchen stools. Those lights still going on during the night, still blinking. Wedding gifts, the VCR and Airpot, and the rice cooker and electric kettle, which are not turned on at the moment. Rosminah wonders; if she had a hundred electrical appliances and set them running all at the same time, would their small function lights flood her kitchen like an entire constellation? Maybe they could form a shape, like neon letters in the dark, a sign, lucid answers. Her question: Did she love the man she married? Or should the question be: Did she marry the man she loved? (Alfian bin Sa'at, 2010, pp. 45-46).

Perhaps one thing that makes Rosminah unhappy is the fact that her family lacks economic capitals. Although Alfian does not provide a detailed account of Awang's job, two things are certain: that Rosminah has to work at a factory to support her family's well-being and that Awang frequently demands his wife's money for whatever reasons. But the most important thing that might be the reason for Rosminah's unhappiness is the fact that her

marital relationship lacks loving experiences: never in the story does Awang show sufficient care, love or tenderness to his wife. Instead, Awang seems to selfishly love his self-value more as shown by a passage telling how careful Rosminah must be in delivering the money that her husband borrows from her to him:

She is also used to his anger when she places the money directly into his hand, with her eyes looking into his face such that he has to turn away. At one such instance, his face had crumpled and he flew into a rage, asking Rosminah if she really thought that he was poor, that he really needed her money that badly. (pp. 32-33).

Awang even seems to neither love nor care much about his children. In a dialogue between him and Rosminah, after snatching the money, he asked how the children were doing, yet the very questions he posed to his wife signifies a pretension that he somehow cared about them, which is a made-up, obvious lie from how Alfian depicts the scene:

"How are the children?" he asks next, cocky and unable to stay silent. Rosminah clasps the button on her purse with a click which she will remember days later. With patience she replies, talking to the reflection of her husband in the bedroom mirror.

"They are all right."

"Any problems in school?"

"No."

"Anything for me to sign?"

"No. Nothing."

"I don't sign if I see red marks."

"Our children don't get red marks."

"I know. I just don't sign if I see that they have been lazy."

"Our children aren't lazy."

"I know." Her husband pauses to compose himself. "I know all that, you don't have to tell me." Her husband then starts to yawn. It could have been a real yawn or he could have made it up. (pp. 33-34)

The depiction of the Rosminah-Awang relationship, therefore, reveals the patriarchal oppression Rosminah is under. There is

neither reciprocal care nor love in it, only the fact that the marriage is used by Awang to extort Rosminah's body. For Awang, Rosminah is nothing but a mere resource to fulfil his sexual desire (although, because of its obviousness, no description of sexual activities between the two is given) and his economic needs, and a tool to preserve his line of descent as a cultural obligation. On this, one can sense how Rosminah has lived her life for the sake of others (Awang and the children) without actually fulfilling her own needs of freedom, desire, and dream.

The Subalterns' "Birthday"

In addition to the patriarchal oppression Rosminah is under, one cannot neglect the terrible experiences that Rosminah had undergone on her first day at the factory: she was five months pregnant with Siti Nuraeni (her second child), she was estranged from the environment of the factory and was even bullied by her co-workers. If we follow Marx's theorizing of labor, these suggest that Rosminah is doubly oppressed: first by the patriarchy and second by the capitalists. How she is unable to speak of the oppressions she is under and can only sob in the silence of the night signifies that she is what Gayatri Spivak (2010) calls the subaltern who lives in what Bhabha (2004) calls an unhomely life. She is overshadowed by the feeling that she is not at home in any circumstances in her life, even when she is inside of her own home, sleeping with her husband and caressing her children.

The only one who can comfort Rosminah from her miseries and unhomeliness is her Indian Singaporean girlfriend Kala. Kala is the one defending Rosminah from the bullies at the factory. She is the only person who ever gives Rosminah a gift on her birthday. Indeed, the whole narrative actually deals with how Rosminah struggled to pay back the gift she had received from Kala (a sandwich maker an ordinary household object which also reflects their status in the class formation of society) by planning to buy a gift for Kala's upcoming birthday as a symbol that their relationship is a reciprocal and loving one. The reason why Kala can comfort Rosminah is that she can also be seen as a subaltern who lives an unhomely life. The difference, however, is that Kala is not

oppressed by the figure of a husband, but of a boyfriend who lied to her about the fact that he has married despite having already had sex with her. Kala is also oppressed by her own parents, who blame her that it is because of her body (that Alfian depicts as male-like) that she is unable to get a husband. The experiences that Kala and Rosminah have been through suggest—following Marxist feminists like Emma Goldmann (2002), Michèle Barrett (2004), and Lillian Robinson (1978)—that women are treated as commodities in a capitalistic society. Here, I am tempted to argue that Kala's parents, by blaming Kala's body for not attracting men, can be said to wail over the fact that the commodity in their hands is not sufficient to meet the demand of the patriarchal market.

The term that I used to describe the position that Rosminah and Kala occupy in their society, the subaltern, and the experience that follows it, the unhomely life, are not actually of Marxist but of postcolonial theorizing. The reason I chose the two is that "Birthday" itself cannot be read without acknowledging the fact that it depicts the lives of two oppressed subjects living in a neo-colonial background: 1990s Singapore. On this, the factory that Rosminah and Kala work at can be seen as the most explicit signifier of neocolonialism in the story. According to the co-worker bullying Rosminah, the factory produces the spare parts for NASA rockets. Why, then, would NASA be dependent on a factory outside the US over the spare parts of its rockets? The question can be answered, again, by following Pang's (2009) logic of creative labor. As the historical narrative mentioned earlier suggests, Western enterprises (in this case, the US) make use of Singapore (a market of low-wage labors) as a region in which its manual productive activity is done, so that their productive forces can evolve into the creative and intellectual ones; so that NASA can focus on scientific experiments and on developing mathematical and cosmological formulas instead of building rocket parts. Alfian's depiction on this matter, therefore, is in line with the politico-economic strategy of Singapore the way it gives itself up to the West for the sake of economic progress.

However, according to the historical narrative of Singapore's political economy given by political economists described earlier, the strategy of giving itself up to the West was implemented in the 1960s-1980s while "Birthday" is set presumably after the 1980s. Does this mean that Alfian is historically incorrect in depicting the climate of Singapore's political economy during the period? I do not believe so. What Alfian does is actually revising (or rather, challenging) the narrative of Singaporean politico-economic history. He shows his readers that even if the state focused on the KBE and ICT revolution during this time, the actuality shows that the two had not been fully implemented yet; as Singapore could not escape from the grip of the West as it was still a region of manual labor, the new productive forces (the intellectual and the creative) had not yet fully populated Singapore. This is why I stated at the beginning of this paper that studies like those of Poon (2016) and Bahrawi (2019) do indeed have some truths in them—that Alfian's works cannot be read separately from the reality of neo-colonialism as the result of the Western capitalism. The victims of this neo-colonial experience are none other than the Singaporean proletariats (factory workers, lower-class society) and especially the female ones as they are the ones who suffer the most: they are oppressed not only by the colonial enterprises and the capitalists, but also by the patriarchal subjects. What this paper adds to the usual postcolonial reading is that the Singaporean capitalists and government are equally complicit in the sufferings of the proletariats and of the subalterns since it is for the sake of the former's hunger for capital that the neo-colonial practice flourished in the region, that the latter continued to suffer.

Touching upon the issue of subalternity, "Birthday" can be seen to illustrate Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak. Alfian, through the Rosminah-Kala relationship, provides a solution for the subalterns similar to that given by Bhabha at the end of *The Location of Culture* (2004) concerning the unhomely lives: social solidarity. On this, one must highlight that deep in her heart, Rosminah loves Kala more than her family as shown in the passage: "But this gift for Kala was something different. It

was to be done in secret" (Alfian bin Sa'at, 2010, p. 43). It is because Rosminah finds her sense of Self, the shared experience of a subaltern living in an unhomely life, in the figure of Kala that she loves Kala more than her family although it is a love that cannot be spoken of with anybody since nobody will ever understand. The social solidarity among the unhomely lives, among the subalterns – this is the exact form of a loving relationship between Rosminah and Kala that keeps them surviving the neocolonial, capitalistic cataclysms.

Unfortunately, at the end of the story, Rosminah failed in taking back the check from her husband's pocket, consisting of the fifty Singaporean dollars money that was supposed to be used for buying Kala a birthday present. Yet Rosminah still wanted Kala to hear her unspoken voice that might explain why she failed to do so. As Rosminah dropped the sandwich maker (Kala's gift for her), she imagined that Kala heard her unspoken voice and was in disbelief at her failure by projecting Kala, in her mental functioning, into the figure of her son who was at the scene. As Rosminah does neither tell her husband that she needed the money to buy Kala a birthday present, nor explain to her children what she was going through, nor tell Kala that she had wanted to give her a birthday present but unable to do so; the subaltern still cannot speak, but this does not mean that it does not want to be heard—"Birthday" is an invitation to hear the unspoken voice of the subaltern.

No "Birthday" for Racists

There exists in "Birthday" another form of inequality. Given that the majority of modern Singaporeans consists of Chinese (Velayutham, 2009; Chew, 2018; Pak, 2021), it is surprising that the only Chinese figure existing in the story is just an old man smoking without paying attention to Rosminah and Kala when the latter told Rosminah about her irresponsible boyfriend. This old man is used by Alfian as a mere part of the background of that particular scene. Following Pierre Macherey (2006), there is a social reality that Alfian wants to highlight by, because of its obviousness, not talking about it (which is also the case with Rosminah-Awang sexual relationship discussed earlier): the ethnic

issue in Singapore. Why, then, there are no Chinese in both Rosminah's and Kala's lives? By not answering, Alfian wants to show the obvious fact: that the Chinese Singaporeans are of a different class from them. On this, a report given by the *Singapore Straits Times* in 1998 can be used as a clue of Singapore's structure of relations of production. According to the report, there are three types of labor in 1990s Singapore: 1) the professional (whose monthly earnings are above S\$ 3500, e.g. managers, administrators); 2) the skilled (whose monthly earnings are in between S\$ 2000 to S\$ 3500, e.g. technicians, architects); and 3) the unskilled (with around S\$ 100 worth of monthly earning). In discussing the report, Low (2001) implies that the majority of Chinese Singaporeans occupied the first two since they have more privileges to higher education than any other ethnicities in Singapore (see also Mutalib, 2011; Chew, 2018). The protagonist who is of Malay descent and her friend Kala who is of Indian descent (seen from the economic condition they have, the labor position they are in, and, following the two, their level of education) are, needless to say, below the higher social class occupied by Chinese Singaporeans. This reading is thus in line with the historical fact discussed previously. Alfian's "Birthday", by not talking about it, accentuates the bitter racial reality of 1990s Singapore.

Between the Form and Content of "Birthday" and Alfian's Political Commitment

Hence, transcending its length, "Birthday" deals with the complex reality of inequalities in Singapore. Not only does it suggest the racial disparity between Chinese Singaporeans and other ethnicities in the region, but it also tells the neo-colonial experience of the region, the struggle of the proletariats, and the patriarchal oppression of Singaporean women. The way Alfian challenges the politico-economic narrative of 1990s Singapore by depicting that Singapore had not yet fully adopted the KBE and ICT scheme but still was a market of low-wage manual labor for the West, while highlighting the historical fact concerning the racial disparity between the Chinese Singaporeans and other races in the region reflects his commitment as one of the leading

figures of social justice in Singapore who supports not only racial equality but also gender equality, justices for the proletariats, and the social solidarity among the subalterns. In so doing, he neither condescendingly teaches his readers about the political party they should follow, nor gives any cliché speeches in the story, but shows his readers the realistic depiction of the female Malay and Indian proletariats under the oppression by the patriarchal subjects, the capitalists, the dominating race, and the Western enterprises.

In addition, similar to Smith's (2015) research, this article finds that the language that Alfian uses in his work is not what is usually called the "standard" English whose structure, pronunciation, and lexicons follow either British or American English. Instead, Alfian uses a mixture of Chinese, Malay and Tamil in his Singaporean English. This is most evident in some exclamations employed in the text such as "*What lah,*" "*Oi!*" or "*Aiyoo.*" The use of this Singaporean English can be interpreted as Alfian's view of Singaporean national identity. For Alfian, Singaporean national identity is a dialectical processing between the native identity, the Western influences, and the multiculturalism of modern Singapore that would produce a sublation—in Hegel's (2019) term—of the three; or an imagined future that is continually formed by present conditions (Smith, 2015; Bahrawi, 2019).

Alfian also uses simple prosody and style in his sentence structure. But there exists a sense of modernism in his plot structure through the use of stream of consciousness. The plot itself in general actually moves linearly. It starts from the night before Rosminah's family went to sleep, when Awang borrowed the money, and ends on the next morning when her children awoke. During the night, Rosminah was unable to sleep and started to recall random events that had led her to the dilemma of Kala's birthday present. In recalling these events, she follows not the temporal order but the stream of her feeling. She recalled first the event happening to her children the previous morning, her meeting with Kala in the factory, her lunch with Kala, her dream of giving the present to Kala, her marriage to Awang, and lastly about the time

when Kala tells Rosminah about her boyfriend and her parents. Hence, "Birthday" moves back and forth between the past, present, and future. This movement results in the story being so simple but needed a complex process of interpretation; a complexity that allows the story to convey a complex reality of inequalities in 1990s Singapore.

Conclusion

In the Introduction of a recent anthology in which "Birthday" is included, Sui (2010) states that the short story deals with an obsession of a middle-aged woman to give her friend a birthday gift. She then equalizes this obsession with that in Poe's stories or in Picasso's paintings—a psychological obsession that is universal in world literature. There are, of course, some truths in her remark, but inscribing the epithet "universal" to describe Alfian's works (indeed, to any works of art and literature) can sometimes be misleading. The Marxist reading just implemented, despite only applied to only one short story, suggests that Alfian's "Birthday" corresponds to the historical (and, especially, the politico-economic) context of his society by the time it was written—that is, "Birthday", as is the case with any literary works across the world, is very particular.

In its relation to the historical narrative whereby most of the time ideology is at work, the story challenges the usual portrayal of the 1990s Singapore's political economy proclaiming that the country had adopted the knowledge-based economy and had converted the manual productive activities into the intellectual and creative ones. The story of Rosminah and Kala working at the factory producing spare parts for NASA rockets suggests that far from being politically and economically independent, Singapore was still overshadowed by the West—it was still under the neo-colonial oppression under the seemingly innocent banners of globalization and economic progress. Yet at the same time, the story underlines the historical fact of the racial disparity between Chinese and non-Chinese Singaporeans. Both the challenge to and the highlight on some portions of the historical narrative of 1990s Singapore in "Birthday" signifies Alfian's strong

commitment to gender equality, justice for proletariats, and social solidarity among the subalterns while not being openly partisan.

This commitment is strengthened by Alfian's configuration of literary form and content: on the one hand, he advocates a future Singapore that synthesizes the native culture, Western influence, and the present multiculturalism through his use of multilingualism and Singaporean English; on the other hand, he recommends a closer reading of complex social realities with all the elements comprising them (psychological, gender, racial, economic, and politics) through his seemingly simple sentences arranged in a stream-of-consciousness plot.

In addition, this paper has shown that Marxist reading on a literary work from a formerly colonized country cannot neglect the experience of neo- and/or colonialism. For, following both the Marxist and postcolonial tradition, colonialism, in its very essence, is a more acute form of capitalism; it has to do with the capitalist urge to collect profit. However, different from the usual postcolonial reading, this paper finds that the Singaporean capitalists and government can be said to be as equally complicit in oppression and inequality happening in the region as the Western neo-colonial enterprises.

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