

Alfian bin Sa'at Biography

Yoong Ren Yan | Nigel Fong | Huang Jiahui | Jeremy Sia | Ram Verma | Sec. 4A/4C 2008 | Raffles Institution

*Singapore you are not my country.
Singapore you are not a country at all.*

*O Singapore your fair shores your garlands your GNP.
You are not a country you are a construction from spare
parts.
You are not a campaign you are last year's posters.
You are not a culture you are poems on the MRT.
You are not a song you are part swearword part lullaby.
You are not Paradise you are an island with pythons.*

*Singapore I am on trial.
These are the whites of my eyes and the reds of my wrists.
These are the deranged stars of my schizophrenia.
This is the milk latex gummy moon of my sedated smile.
I have lost a country to images, it is as simple as that.
Singapore you have a name on a map but no maps to your
name.
This will not do; we must stand aside and let the Lion
crash through a madness of cymbals back to that dark
jungle heart
when eyes were still embers waiting for a crownless
Prince of Palembang.*

– excerpts from *Singapore You Are Not My Country*

After hearing such a politically distressing piece, it is to be expected that the typical Singaporean reacts with shock and awe, or at least be taken aback. The piece questions and attacks the very fundamentals of Singaporean society: blind patriotism, “crass materialism”, “graceless vanities”, and a vision of the future prescribed by the government. In another country, perhaps, such a poem would be greeted not with confused frowns and concerned glances, but instead with appreciation for a fresh perspective. But it would not be surprising if the typical Singaporean, allergic to being exposed to all things anti-establishment, were to collapse in psychological convulsions, stuttering “did he just say...” while pointing a trembling finger at the poet, or maybe the secret agent behind him.

Following this preliminary dropping of jaws and dilation of pupils, the typical Singaporean would, in typically Singaporean fashion, begin to speculate about how their omnipotent 'gahmen' will respond to such a grave transgression of its authority. Indeed, the typical Singaporean would say (albeit in hushed tones: "lest 'they' hear!") that to the government, this piece amounts to sacrilegious sedition, warranting a blacklisting as a Political Dissident in a classified report by classified people to be stashed away somewhere in the classified depths of the Internal Security Department.

Still, such a intrepid criticism of the core tenets of the Singaporean government is still taboo, and in the end, the typical Singaporean would judge anyone who produces such controversial and indeed thought-provoking works not as valiant, but rather as anything from rash to masochistic or even utterly insane to be openly challenging the government and its indomitable rhetoric.

But the poet is no typical Singaporean. He is none other than Alfian bin Sa'at, and this is what the typical Singaporean probably thinks of him.

Of course, all of the above is purely hypothetical, since *One Fierce Hour*, the poetry anthology in which the poem is published, sold a humble 2000 copies, and the typical Singaporean has probably never read the poem before, much less heard of the poet.

The Misrepresented

In spite of his relative obscurity, Alfian was thrust into the public spotlight following the abrupt conclusion of his stint as a relief teacher at East View Secondary. The unexplained hasty termination of his contract by the Ministry of Education prompted him to request for an account of the reasons behind his dismissal, even "[extending his] apologies for being such a liability to the school, a liability whose grounds [eluded him]". He demanded not for his job back, but for the Ministry to be held accountable to him and to the rest of Singapore for its actions, and thus expected a reply "that [was] nothing less than forthcoming, sincere, and devoid of either bureaucratic obscurantism or obfuscation." But it was much to the contrary, the reply he received was "crafted to communicate maximum bureaucratic reticence", "[abusing]... language", masking truth and elucidating nothing. Alfian commented, "If I was still a teacher, I would give your letter a failing grade."

"We would like to explain that as an employer, the Ministry of Education sets stringent criteria in the recruitment of relief teachers ... considering each applicant based on several factors ... we look at each applicant in view of the specific requirements of the Ministry at the time, considering each application as a whole, on its own merit."

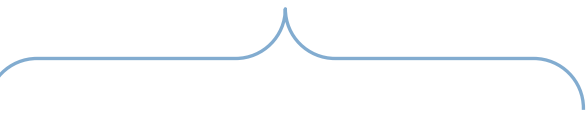
– The Ministry of Education's reply

Since the Ministry exhibited its will to perpetuate the aura of mystery that pervades Singapore's state institutions, the public was left to wonder what the government's true intentions were. Following the incident, Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew mentioned that "teachers are expected to conduct themselves in a manner which befits this role ... the values they hold are also an important consideration as they are role models for our children." Evidently, Alfian had austere

“failed some of those standards”, to the extent that “[his] continued presence in the school represented some mortal threat to the students”.

Once again, one can only speculate upon the real reasons behind Alfian’s dismissal. Alfian led a life that went very much against convention, establishment and norms. The government probably deemed him unsuitable for fear that, with his reputation of being an *enfant terrible*, he would “evangelize certain kinds of anti-establishment things” or “[practise] some form of ‘classroom activism’”, or perhaps there was “moral panic” upon the realization that he could “be able to direct the process of sexual identity formation among impressionable youths”, “[converting them] to ‘a homosexual lifestyle’”. The list of possibilities goes on.

All this was hotly debated by the public, with the result that the sympathies of Singaporeans generally sided with Alfian, with the government’s motives put under intense scrutiny. The government was thus seen as “overly panicky” or grossly unreasonable, while Alfian was labelled as yet another tragic “victim” of the government’s overarching desire to preserve its absolute power, branded a dissident by the government simply because he has said that-which-must-not-be-said, as the public showered him with pity by the truckload without bothering to truly understand him.



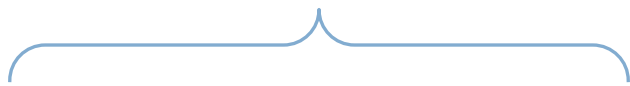
“It’s so easy to be pigeonholed in a place like Singapore ... the problem is that when a label like that attaches itself to you, then you hear the latches of several doors being clicked shut, followed by a sense of foreboding; you realise your manoeuvring space is now restricted, and you aren’t as limber as you were at playing the usual institutional game of hide-and-seek.”

– Alfian bin Sa’at

Sadly, these perceptions of him as a lunatic, a rebel, and a victim are but cavalier misrepresentations of who Alfian really is, and what he really stands for.



Doubtlessly, Alfian would have already guessed at the reactions that the typical Singaporean and the atypical government would have to someone who has done what he has done. But how does he then react to these reactions?



“Alfian, if you live in Singapore, you must be like a robot. If they tell you to walk straight, you walk straight. You stray from the path and they will get you ... Singapore is like that.”

– Alfian’s mother, paraphrased by Alfian



The Agent

In sociology, 'structure' is the aggregate of societal and environmental factors outside of the individual's independent control that affect or influence their opportunities and choices, and it is this suffocating structure of Singaporean society that Alfian feels compelled to speak out about, as he has done in *Singapore You Are Not My Country* and other works. The ideologies and government-imposed narratives, the prescriptions of the 'right' way to live, the Westminster representation system that gives the ruling party almost every seat in Parliament while winning only two-thirds of the popular vote, the survivalist and vulnerable mentality that pervades society, the "thin-skinned criticism-averse authoritarianism", the inherent *kiasuism*, "the intolerance towards anything that questions the status quo", the governmental intervention in its citizens' private lives, the "sloganised Singapore", the "chilling" "over-manicured artificiality", the consistent "[dehumanization]", the state monopoly on truth, the lack of accountability and transparency in state institutions, the death penalty, and what he terms the Great Marriage Debate are all elements in the structure that spurred Alfian to challenge this structure and attempt to regain some of his individuality from it.

"... Singapore is an extremely [overly] determined society ... by the time you finish primary school, the rails have been set on you and all you have to do is just go on it like a choo-choo train and go on to do your 'O' Levels, your 'A' Levels, your PSC scholarship, and your bond and I think you can gaze into a crystal ball at the time you are 13 then very well see what you will be doing at 30. I think it is possible if you live in a place like Singapore. So structured, so ordered."

– Alfian bin Sa'at

While Alfian holds views aplenty about his structure of Singaporean society and the Singaporean government, these perceptions are woefully insufficient. To merely know is useless. It is only when one translates thoughts into action that hopes and dreams can be realized, and existence can have meaning and purpose. Only by responding to the structure that surrounds him can Alfian exercise his inherent agency. In his words, "if sometimes you really, really feel the need to do something ... then go out and do it."

The Artist

Alfian has actualized his agency in art, and has written a copious amount of plays, poems, and prose in both English and Malay, earning him "[critical] acclaim", but while action is imperative, the scale of one's action depends on one's own feeling. As Alfian puts it, "If you think it is just something that you could express in a blog entry, then let it be and that's your action and that's fine enough. And if you want to go further sometime in the future, then there shouldn't be anything stopping you." Art, to him, "is a way of looking at the world ... a way of appreciating certain things ... a way of thinking, recognizing, making connections".

This involves not only expressing oneself, but expressing on behalf of society, by "channelling the kinds of things a society feels at any one point of time into certain works". In this manner, the arts portray "the clearest reflection of ... how

"I once read a quote: 'Literature is most responsible to society when it does not try to be so.' I believe that. Fervently."

– Alfian bin Sa'at

[society] sees itself, how [society] is seen by others". This is in direct response to the present situation, where "only the government, it seems, can decide what 'society is ready for'". The arts can too.

It is through this abstract conception of art as an intrinsically intangible mindset or attitude that Alfian counters the structure, as it allows him to circumvent "the feeling of apathy, of paralysis, of indifference" that the Singaporean structure confers, since "poetry, for [him], is where language is most free". Thus Alfian can "clarify how [he] thinks or feels", do things truly independently without the imposition of structural determinism.

The Patriot

And that brings us to the underlying question: Why? Why does Alfian bin Sa'at do it? Why has he chosen this life to lead, when so many factors point elsewhere?

Alfian writes not just to express himself, but because he cares about society.

Although after reading *Singapore You Are Not My Country*, some may accuse Alfian of being flagrantly unpatriotic and

unappreciative, he was in reality not "[rejecting] Singapore as a whole but [rejecting] the idea of Singapore as it has been prescribed from the top". When Alfian expresses himself, his innate idealism and patriotism are naturally stoked by the imperfections he sees in his environment. Love for a country does not necessarily entail love for the way it is run, and this certainly holds true for Alfian's patriotism. Herein Alfian breaks free of the orthodox patriotism most commonly recognized by governments – as Alfian said, "a patriot is one who loves his country and criticizes his government ... you are no less a citizen, no less a patriot if you criticize, and it doesn't make you a

"Underlying any social or political transformation is the transformation of the self. Conversely, one is compelled to acknowledge that any self-transformation, say, within the premises of the theatre, needs to be nurtured and extended by the agencies and forces of social and political transformation in the public domain. Or else, in the absence of any reciprocity between these possible transformations, all that we are left with is the ontology of theatre, devoid of its dialectical possibilities of interaction with the world."

– Rustom Barucha

*I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.*

– Edward Everett Hale

dissident." There remains a deeply rooted attachment to the society by virtue of the fact that it is the society that he lives in, saying that "dissent can be, should be, a discourse of love." To Alfian, writing, expressing his opinions and practicing the Arts in his personal capacity are his ways of fulfilling the inherent obligation or responsibility that he has to the society around him, as "Alfian the Citizen". In his words, "I want to be the one to do something."

Despite the seemingly aloof and distant façade that *Singapore, You Are Not My Country* conveys, Alfian practices his own

underlying feelings of patriotism not in displays that he finds superficial and frivolous, but rather in the form of criticism and idealism that he feels is an integral part of any society – a feedback loop afforded by the Arts. According to Alfian, “[he writes] if [he feels] there is an urgency to say” or “[address]” something, which warrants “[pushing] the envelope”, and not a matter of “being sensational or shocking”. Drawing from his position that Singapore, in all its economic prosperity, is socially decrepit and politically bereft, he feels it his duty to expose what Singapore lacks, such that “things can be bettered”. With this political subject-matter, art opens up different perspectives to different issues, and “[sustains] ... dialogue” and “encourages ... debate” with audiences.

Still the Artist

And yet, even as his work is peppered with flagrantly political overtones, Alfian refuses to pinpoint what his message is, since “that would presuppose that one has a message to deliver in the first place”, leaving it instead up to the reader to “take whatever you want from it”, and even denies that his art has a purpose at all. Alfian “[doesn’t] believe in writing as a series of political manoeuvres”. Looking at the impact he and other Singaporean artists actually have on the structure, Alfian is decidedly “really very modest about what art or literature can do”, claiming that the “influences cultural workers may have” are impossible to measure, despite the copious numbers of accolades that he has accumulated through the years for his works.

This apparent contradiction seems to reveal itself at the core of every artist. It is the question of an ultimate motivation – do they do what they do for themselves, or for others? Is it a mere dream that “putting [one’s] voice out there – its singularity, its sheer defiance... – can potentially transform the way [one’s] readers think or feel”? In our view Alfian’s ultimate purpose is in expressing himself, while he holds effecting real change on society as a by-product. In other words, Alfian is not an advocate, nor a politician, but fundamentally an artist. This deeply contrasts with the prevailing structural perception that Alfian’s work is “criticism for the sake of criticism, dissent for the sake of it”. When all is said and done, Alfian simply wants to express himself, and the reason why he chooses to do so in the field of politics is because he cares about the society and the country.

“Maybe it's not about writing for an imagined audience, or readership, because they will always be an abstract entity and more often than not you are bound to be disappointed by their reaction, or is often the case, their indifference. Maybe it's enough to put the work out for those who believe in you, and if the work resonates on a more universal level, then that's just a fortuitous bonus.”

– Alfian bin Sa'at

The Deprived

In alignment with his stance that more ‘basic’ human needs like sustenance are contiguous with more ‘complex’ human needs like freedom, and that the former has been fulfilled while the latter neglected in Singapore, Alfian has a deeper appreciation of personal ‘self-actualization’. This is contrary to the government’s stance that “financial injections” are the ultimate trump for all of

"I don't see theatre as a sanctuary. I don't want this 'freedom' in the theatre, if there is no freedom outside the theatre. This theatrical 'freedom', I would argue, is illusory, and merely feeds into the privileged domains of civil society, which the state is only too happy to subsidise for the propagation of its cultural capital."

– Rustom Barucha

Singapore's problems. While he admits that artists "do need to rely ... on some public funding", this would only serve to "generate some kind of dialogue, or debate, or discussion or buzz", and "an infusion of capital" still does not directly translate into a more vibrant arts scene.

Alfian seems to be indifferent to the lack of a rice bowl in the arts in Singapore, emphasizing that it provides him with a way to express, rather than the "financial viability" of it in earning him a decent salary. In his words, "I am not sure even right now that I am writing for a living." He advocates sacrificing these more 'basic' needs in favour of the fulfilment of higher values, ideals or beliefs. He sums this up by saying that "at some point you should just go, 'I feel that this is an absolutely necessary thing that I have to do and the money be damned.'"

Related to this point, Alfian has experienced various governmental restrictions on his work, including selective sponsorship on the part of the National Arts Council. Furthermore, many of Alfian's works, both off- and on-stage, have been censored by the government, which has been described by him as "an arbitrary exercise of power" which "is nothing less than violence". To Alfian, the arts have a role in providing an "outlet to speak out", "[liberating]" and "[empowering]" Singaporeans, and this has been impinged upon by the government's "paranoia" that easing the restrictions would result in "political instability", and concomitantly a loss of investor confidence. To justify their actions, the ruling party "[invokes] the idea of this silent, deeply conservative majority", which needs their protection through these restrictions. Alfian condemns pre-censorship, which involves submitting scripts or poems for the consideration of the Media Development Authority before they can be staged or published. In this sense, "artists are made complicit with the perpetuation of certain ideas, often in a non-consensual manner", such that their art affirms the position that "everything is [alright] with Singapore".

"That is the kind of skepticism the state has towards artists. 'Everyone is working, 9 to 5. But look at you. Work 3 hours a day and expect to get money out of it.'"

– Alfian bin Sa'at

Thus we have seen that even in the face of these immense pressures, Alfian and other artists remain unwavering in pursuing their work. But this resilient quality does not preclude them from thinking of "throwing in the towel" and giving up when the going gets tough.

The Depressed

Even Alfian, one of the most persistent artist-critics of the government, has been through periods of depression and "helplessness". Alfian felt that with all the liberalisation that the government was

claiming credit for, along with recent forays into “[eavesdrop]” than to “listen”, “[constructing] more water-tight and rhetorically-persuasive arguments” for “whatever policies they intend to shovel down our throats”. The government, in his opinion, was further “[anaesthetizing]” a population whose morality was “irredeemably ruled by instant gratifications and conspicuous consumption”. In these circumstances, the government’s attempts to clamp down were still bearable. But the fact that the artist, whose job it was to reflect society, was perhaps irreconcilably diverging from it, was a slap in Alfian’s face. As “living in Singapore [became] more intolerable by the day”, he, and many other Singapore artists, simply grew tired.

“feedback-gathering”, they wanted more to

“I’m over and done with those issues; I feel exhausted with them and unappreciated; I feel the constituency that works like those is supposed to represent and give voice to is generally apathetic and docile and cowardly...”

– Alfian bin Sa’at

The Idealist

“I have always considered myself an idealist. I think all this set the bar at an impossibly high level because then I think that is the only way to move forward.”

– Alfian bin Sa’at

Man is born free. Free to live, free to choose, free to believe. But society has the tendency to dictate choice and belief for us, such that we are neither free to choose, nor free to believe. That is the structure that imposes itself upon society.

And yet Alfian is still writing.

Then, perhaps, there are ardent ideals which further underlie Alfian’s perceptions and responses to the structure, fundamentally fuelling him to keeping doing what he does.

What defines a man are his ideals; intangible personal forces driving his tangible reactions to society. Does he allow his sovereign choice to be chained down by the power logics of society? Does he fling his ideals into the bonfire of pragmatism? Is he a product of his choice, or solely one of his environment?

Alfian has certainly not allowed his ideals to be subservient to the monolithic paradigms of the government and the practicalities of reality. This is very much an uphill task in our social climate – to many, money and success is the primary, if not the sole arbiter of human hopes and dreams. Even if your ideals remain unscathed by money, Alfian puts it that “there are so many myths when you grow up in Singapore that you internalize them and after a while it becomes the truth”. And yet, for Alfian, that has not diminished the agency of his ideal. Uncovering the layers of meaning in his

“I remember an activist I met in Sweden, who smiled at me when I asked how she can continue with her anti-war efforts while Guantanamo is smugly and triumphantly looming over her cause. And she said, ‘But we always lose.’ Her voice was bright and optimistic, despite the content of her words.”

– Alfian bin Sa’at

works reveals fiery ideals, such as democratic freedoms, social justice, and the pursuit of truth. This is his first response to the structure of society – to stay true to himself, to attack these structures in his works where he thinks they leave much to be desired.

Alfian has also not given up the sanctity of choice to the power logics of society and government. He was once destined to be a doctor. He thought that going to medical school was not a product of his choice – but rather that “of government politics of visibility, of representation ... because we don't have enough Malay doctors”. But eventually, he realized that medicine was not “what [he wanted] to do with [his] life”, and dropped out of medical school, giving up success, prestige, and money, to pursue his true calling in the arts. But it is through this that we see how he refuses to submit his sanctity of choice to the structures in society, and how, at heart, he does not conform, but remains a free spirit. He speaks what he thinks, once saying that journalists for *The Straits Times* were “unwashed, crab-lice-bitten [twats]”.

Alfian is Alfian

Alfian has done things that not everyone agrees with. A more pragmatic person, who values hard work, might want to tell idealists and artists in general to get a real job, rather than believe in the power of their dreams. Being free-spirited, to some, is just a euphemism for living a directionless life. These are also things that placed Alfian along the margin of society, but when we call these people radicals, anti-establishment, social deviants – what do we actually mean? By what over-arching, universal, unquestionable yardstick are we using to judge them? Let us refrain from making value judgements, or to prove that he has to be either the thesis or antithesis of a role model. Rather, as Alfian as he navigates the delicate balances between structure and agency, let us learn what we can.

In spite of whatever the structure throws at him, Alfian remains firm, resolute, and convicted. He advocates that artists should “take the path with most resistance wielding their little machete and hack through the jungle”.

He has refused “to feel fatalistic and helpless”.
He has refused to feel alone against the world.
He has refused to “self-censor” by suppressing himself just to avoid confrontations with the government. He has refused “to feel any bitterness” towards those who have acted for the structure. He has refused to leave this country that he has grown to hate and love. He has refused to abandon his hopes and dreams.

And he will not do all that because he has already chosen. He has chosen to believe in “recklessness over paralysis”, to be “moving” and “dynamic” rather than stagnate. He has chosen to have a mindset of “calculated naiveté ... to guard against poisoning [himself]”

He has chosen to speak his mind since “the [cost] of not speaking out is greater than the cost of

Patricia: I thought you liked living overseas.

Patrick: I do, Ma. But I think each time someone says goodbye it's a way of saying 'yes'. Yes, you win. Yes, I give up. Yes, you're right, I can't change anything. I want to have that privilege to say 'no'. And I can only say 'no' if I stick around. Does that make sense?

– an excerpt from one of Alfian's plays

being persecuted". He has chosen to see all his obstacles as "only as significant as [he makes] them out to be". He has chosen, above all, to be himself.

Alfian is Alfian, and that's really all that matters.

Epilogue

It is our express hope that we have, with this biography, offered a perspective that, while distinctive from other perceptions, represents the essence of who Alfian is, and not complicit to society's and the government's gross misinterpretations of him. We sincerely thank Alfian for affording us this opportunity, and wish him the best for the future.

"An interview has been conducted with me; I say a few things; the eventual published interview is a select transcript of what I have said. What I have said has effectively been neutered, I can only go as far as to say that I have been *used*..."

– Alfian bin Sa'at