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ULASAN BUKU/ *BOOK REVIEW*

Childhood memoir and personal narratives

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***Across the Causeway: A Singapore Childhood,* by N. B. Badarudin, Selangor: Senisyurga Media, 2015, 170 pp (ISBN: 9671312411)**.

Personal memoirs gain authority by the light they shed on cultural and historical determinants —events, subjectivity, language, and generic conventions. *Across the Causeway* presents a canny and accessible insight into the mingling of cultures and the formation of Malay identity, as the narrator looks back on her early years, living in the Singapore of the Sixties. The book also explores the ramifications of the schism between Malay nationalism and the new politics of modernity. The author suggests the work is no tell-all family saga, but semi-autobiographical, based on the contemplation of 'selected vignettes that have helped a child make sense of her family dynamics, her complex identity and the fluid reality around her' (iii). I value this text all the more for its insight into a mother-daughter dyad and its revelation of social and family ties in a real context. I find I can connect.

The railway is a convenient metaphor and a one-way journey aboard The Rhythm of the Night is an apt vehicle for reflection. Stations mark intervals along a line, nodes of connection—south to north and west to east, gateways to new encounters, new territories, and new epochs. The body is in transit from one stage in life to another. The work draws upon Mak's (Rabiah's) reminiscences and her daughter, Bet's thoughts, as they say goodbye to the Singapore of the mid-Sixties and take the overnight train in a Third Class carriage to Kuala Lumpur in December 1965. Bet is nine years old. Her relationship with her mother is symbiotic. In the course of a night, the strands of Bet's family narrative become one with the traumatic geopolitical markers of Malay culture and social history.

Tanjong Pagar Station is the beginning and end of the line in Singapore. Bukit Timah is the next little station *en route*. Mak talks about the first eight years of her life not far from Kampong Jawa. Her mother died in 1932, most likely from a botched abortion, caused by the shame of being pregnant at the same time as her eldest daughter Enah. Mak's narrative voice is sometimes wry and sometimes heartbreaking but always honest, winning attention. She has to help mind her siblings, nephews and nieces and has little formal schooling, but is self-taught. She says she got her gentle side from her Javanese heritage but her fierce temper from her father's father, a fierce Bugis warrior from Sulewesi. I relish this kind of dramatic detail.

Kranji Station and Woodlands are associated with the trauma of warfare, invasion, dehumanisation, atomic bombs and the Japanese surrender. Events are horrible but the narrative does not dwell on them. By the time the train crosses the Causeway and reaches Johor Baru Mak is well into stories of married life before Bet was born. Mak is a realist. She accepts the restless stranger chosen by her family to be her husband and dutifully gets on with the business of living. Aji Din is sent to work for the Japanese in Indonesia but events bring grief. Mak tells Bet of the 'Hell Boat' return across the Melaka Straits from Medan to Port Swettenham. Times are hard. Her babies die in the crossing.

Chapter Five is inspired by a Malay folk rhyme: "*The fish from the ocean and the tamarind from the land, they meet in the pot and blend*" (p. 43). Mak tells Bet about her father's family and their Arabic and Islamic connections. She reveals that Siddi was too strict towards his clever son, so Bapak rebelled and ran away to sea, exploring the Orient and later seeking the company of Malay journalists who sought to develop a Malay 'voice' in public affairs. He becomes a young revolutionary and is jailed for his activism. Meanwhile, Siddi offers Rabiah and her new baby, Bet, his protection in a prestigious Klang house, seventy miles from Kuala Lumpur. Siddi and his wife are kind; however, soon friction arises with other members of her father-in-law's household. Rabiah chooses to return to Singapore to be near Bapak in jail and her own family. She supports Bet by working as a seamstress.

At 11 pm the train stops briefly at Rengam Station. Bet remembers being four years old and the move to Kaki Bukit when her father is released. She makes friends with a neighbouring lad, Yon. The families are too poor to send the children to kindergarten, so Bet and Yon explore the Malay Settlement and natural surroundings together until they are of school age. Yon goes to the local Malay school for boys, but because the girl's school is full Bet begins her formal education at the English primary school, Kelok Kurau West (Snapper's Bay West). However, 1964 is a year of political unrest—five days of rioting and an ensuing month when Singapore is under curfew and their schooling is interrupted. Bapak decamps for Mersing in Johore to avoid the authorities.

Chapter Thirteen is called 'Kicked Out and Cut Adrift'. The train is five hours away from KL. Bet tries to make sense of the Separation of Singapore from the Malaysian confederation and the impact it had on their lives. She remembers how Lee Kuan Yew appeared in the media, campaigning for 'a sovereign democratic nation' and 'the principles of liberty and justice' and adult conversations. Yon reports his teachers' reaction to the idea that Malays are 'immigrants' to Singapore who must not look to Malaysia as their homeland or ask for special treatment. This rhetoric angers Malay nationalists and when Tunku Abdul Rahman kicks Singapore out of the Malaysian confederation Singapore Malaysians are left in the lurch. Yon is despondent about his future and says the Malay school certificate will be worth nothing now in Singapore.

The demands of nation-state figures are large in the reckoning. Fathers who follow a drum! The coordinates of gender are located in complex patterns of family, place, sexuality and culture. I believe there is a certain family dynamic based on the trope of the absent father which by extension affirms the Mother's nurturing qualities and capacities to provide a certain degree of stability in children's lives, while men readily assume their freedoms to roam at will, outside the domestic sphere.

I was thirteen years old and receiving an education as a British Forces brat at boarding school in Singapore when Bet started her journey to KL on the Rhythm of the Night. In

December of 1965 my father was stationed at Butterworth, near Penang, but soon to be transferred to Singapore. My sister was nine years old, the same age as Bet, and soon to be enrolled at Seletar Primary School, a military base, towards the northeast of the island. We empathise from experience with Bet's dislocation and how every move disrupts the psyche's equilibrium and carries a sense of loss.

Bet feels she has everything she wants in the Singapore kampong and is sad to leave. However, Mak (Rabiah) explains that Bapak couldn't get a job in Singapore and might be jailed. Effectively, she must follow her father into exile. Wanderers tell stories and write things down to make their world appear more real. This testament emerges as a tribute to Mak's courage and resourcefulness in hard times. Bet learns about her roots and resilience.

The text is organised into fifteen chapters. Associative memories take the form of descriptive observations and scripted dialogue, spaced for easy reading. A preface presents a historical flow-chart of the diaspora in the Southeast Asian region and a preamble which evokes the mythic and folk origins of Malay people in flight. The narrator strives for an umbrella to reconcile the disjunctions caused by her nomadic childhood: "From what Mak told me, I learned that to flee is not to wilt, that *Melayu tak semestinya layu.* That it was really a chance to make a fresh start, to begin anew and open the next chapter in our lives" (p. 1).

The book, in English, also contains a useful glossary of Malay words. The text is enhanced by a few personal photographs and embellished with archival material which ranges in setting from the early nineteen hundreds to the Changi and Joo Chiat markets in 1979. Nonetheless, the conjured images do not seem exotic or strange but frozen sections of a shared world. Narratives such as *Across the Causeway* enable synchronicity of diverse cultures. I can remember shopping in Jalan Kayu at the latter end of the Sixties. But my family was moving further south, eventually to Australia in 1968 when our father was demobbed from the Airforce and returned to civilian life. Bet was going in the opposite direction, leaving the world she knew, to find her father, a Malay activist who had never taken Singapore citizenship and could not be reconciled to Lee Kuan Yew's rhetoric for a new independent and democratic nation. As subordinates in a patriarchy, we were inured to constantly pulling up stakes and moving on in Daddy's wake, wherever it took us. As minors, there was no choice but acceptance. We carried little in the way of material goods but memories in our bodies and our treasures in our heads.

The train stops in Negri Sembilan at Tampin. Bet remembers social events with her extended family. She is the poor relation and wears her cousins' hand-me-downs, goes to birthday parties and outings but her little family does not provide them. She observes that the Elders are not happy about the influence of Western popular culture and non-traditional ways but the younger generation learned to weave in and out of Clan Rules. Children married up and they married out, even going abroad to pursue their professions. And women had careers aside from domestic responsibilities. The narrator reflects on child mortality from accidents and disease and the impact on the way children were consequently valued. After the loss of five children, Kak Asmah's father cannot be strict and risk losing her from the family circle. He allows her to dress as she pleases in public and plays in a band. Young couples ride motorcycles.

Badarudin tackles controversial inter-generational issues but keeps a light hand on the tone of her narrative. Humour diffuses the knowledge of stubborn attitudes and conflict. Cheeky kids got an earful from their elders, but the trick was to develop a thick skin, not

to go too far, to be sensible. The narrator describes the ploys used by the young adults to achieve their desires and win their parents' approbation. The rules about mixed marriages were relaxed and courtship rituals were modernized. Hopeful suitors were advised by their girlfriends on the tasty treats required to seduce High-strung Mothers into acceptance. However, like a hardwood tree which produces fruit in plenty, Mak believed a 'strong tight-knit family … shades and supports its members' (p. 137). Bet understands.

Aji Din (Bapak) returns to the fold intermittently, a strong background presence in Bet's life, but he is driven to follow his dreams of Malay unity and collectivism without the burden of his womenfolk. Mak is immersed in her extended family—real people—while Bet observes and learns to distance herself and adapt to circumstances.

The scope of this book is at once epic and complex, yet the crafting of the text is deceptively simple, accessible, and restrained. The writer is disciplined and the style unsentimental, relying on inference and calling on the readers' imaginations, intellect, and empathy to colour the story. Creative work is not easy. The author likens the drafting process to peeling back the layers of an onion and acknowledges the editorial services of her son, the suggestions of her daughter and the encouragement of her first readers in bringing the book to fruition. There are no superfluous dumps of information. The work is short enough to captivate and inform rather than bore.

The train crosses the Negri Sembilan-Selangor border and reaches Kajang. Bet worries about making new friends. The train reaches KL after a ten-hour ride; it is early morning. Bet steps out from a cocoon of painful introspection onto the busy platform. She looks for Kak Hana's welcoming hand, a friend from the past, tied to Rabiah by a sense of mutual obligation and affection, to guide them towards their new home. Bet has no illusions that life will be any easier here, but she is open to a new beginning.