

A Tapestry of Colours

2

Stories from Asia

Edited by
ANITHA DEVI PILLAI

Anitha Devi Pillai

A Tapestry of Colours 2

Marshall Cavendish Editions

This book features 12 stories from Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia, written especially for young adults.

This specially curated anthology of short stories from Asia explores the human spirit and lives of the common man separated by time, space and culture, and yet united in the human spirit to overcome the difficulties that they face in life. It provides an insight into the rich and diverse landscape of Asia, as well as heritage and cultural practices. It also challenges pre-conceived notions of biases and beliefs about other cultures and opens up room for discussion on the differences that define the human race. Each story in this anthology is also accompanied by an essay from the writer, providing a rare look into the writer's mind and writing process.

A Tapestry of Colours 2 encourages readers to reflect on their own values, perspectives and identities, and reflect on how their own experiences, beliefs and actions impact society.

Featuring stories by

Clara Mok • Carol Pang • Karen Kao • Lalaine F Yanilla Aquino • Debasree Gosh • Ismim Putera • Alice Bianchi-Clark • Heidi Emily Eusebio-Abad • Sohana Manzoor • Sumitra Selvaraj • Tina Jimin Walton • Prasanthi Ram

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Sample Spreads for Viewing

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Foreword

The two-volume set of *A Tapestry of Colours – Stories from Asia*, edited by Dr Anitha Devi Pillai, offers teachers a uniquely valuable resource for classrooms and an extraordinary opportunity to help students discover for themselves what the reading of literature can offer to them in delight and in their expanded understanding of human experience. Of all the literary genres, the genre of the short story seems to me most suitable for classroom use. Short stories are, by definition, fiction that can be read in what used to be called “one sitting.” I love the idea of a “sitting,” and recently saw it defined as 20 minutes to an hour. In my own years as an elementary and secondary student, 20 minutes may have been the outer limit of my capacity to sit in one place. But a good story might hold me somewhat longer, and the stories in this volume promise to hold students long enough to be read, if not always in one sitting, surely in no more than two sittings and usually well within the time typically allotted in a classroom both for reading and for discussion of what was read.

The individual stories in these two volumes, moreover, are presented in a textual setting that is likely to promote and deepen the reflection and discussion that inevitably follows classroom reading – and certainly ought to follow reading, if students are to gain the full benefit from what they have read. The setting I am referring to for these stories is the apparatus provided in these volumes for every included story, whereby each story is prefaced by a short personal note from its writer about the cultural context in which the story was written, and followed by the writer’s account of how the completed story came into being: what occasioned it, what problems it presented, what the writer was hoping to

accomplish for the reader and so on. The effect of this framing material is, first, to enhance a reader's interest in the story, based on the reader's intensified sense of personal involvement with the writer, and second, to deepen a reader's understanding of the story, by ensuring that the reader understands the cultural references or historical moment, or personal circumstances that are the context for each individual story and writer.

We must remember that short stories are not specialized technical kinds of discourse (though they can take on new and unfamiliar forms and include entirely original features), but they represent the literary genre that is most natural to all human beings in every human society. They have their anthropological origins in dreams and gossip and myths and family adventures and personal experiences that are told in everyday life and are frequently worth re-telling. Every child and adult knows from living with other human beings how to listen to and respond to such stories. As teachers of literary short stories, we must build on rather than cancel out the competence of all our students as persons with extensive experience in hearing and enjoying stories.

And, given the excellent collection of stories presented here, with their illuminating introductions and intimate accounts of their generative occasions, almost no student will be able to resist the essential dimension of literary experience – that of becoming immersed in the story itself and thereby ready for rich conversation about what happened and why we care.

Sheridan Blau, PhD

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Department of Arts and Humanities
Teachers College, Columbia University;
Emeritus Professor of English and Education
University of California, Santa Barbara

Preface

The short story is a very welcoming text type as its brevity and accessibility make it an excellent platform to explore unknown topics and difficult subjects. It also gives readers an insight into other worlds and lives of people across the world within a short period of time.

In fact, short story readers were found to be more thoughtful, creative and willing to consider competing viewpoints than non-fictional essay readers by Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley and Mihnea Moldoveanu from the University of Toronto. Short story readers were also found to be open to exploring unfamiliar territories which helped to broaden their minds and engage them in honest conversations about the lives and actions of others. In other words, short stories have been found to be effective in nurturing empathetic readers who are respectful of other cultures. As the prolific author Neil Gaiman once said, "Fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gifts of seeing the world through their eyes."

These two collections of short stories, *A Tapestry of Colours 1 & 2 – Stories from Asia*, aim to do just that by presenting stories from our neighbours in Asia and providing us with a means to understand them through narratives. This makes these collections of stories a valuable resource in the language and literature classroom as well.

Emeritus Professor Sheridan Blau, a well-renowned academic of English and Education at Teacher's College, Columbia University, illuminates the unique nature of these two books, which connects each short story to its setting and the writer and the importance of doing so. I am deeply grateful that Professor

Blau's insightful comments captured the essence of the value of short stories to readers.

The contributing writers have captured the spirit and multiple facets of living and growing up in various parts of Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, China, Korea, Japan, Bangladesh and India). The writers have to be commended for their collective willingness to share notes on their craft as they add an important perspective. I am indebted to the writers for their support and am deeply grateful to them for helping to create a meaningful conversation about the different facets of Asia.

I am also grateful to the following educators and passionate fiction lovers who have helped to provide comments on the short stories to make them very relatable and meaningful for youths: Aileen Chai, Amanda Sarah Chin, Amala Rajan, Azeena Badarudeen, Bernice Xu, Geetha Creffield, John Praveen Raj, Dr Mary Ellis, Michelle Wong, Priyanka Chakraborty, Selvarani Suppiah, Shafiq Rafi, Shalini Damodaran and Tivona Low.

Special thanks to Sumi Baby Thomas, the research assistant on this project.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the publishing team from Marshall Cavendish International: Melvin Neo, Mindy Pang and Anita Teo for bringing this set of books to life and to the public.

Anitha Devi Pillai

Newspaper Phantom

Clara Mok

Singaporeans would remember waking up to the “plop” of newspapers landing on their doorsteps or the sight of folded newspapers tucked between the grilles of their flat gates. In private estates, some newspapers land right on target under covered porches, while some land in the open. A heavy rain would result in the newspapers in the open getting drenched and soggy, and would have to be replaced by the newspaper vendor.

Most Singaporeans may have never come face to face with their newspaper carriers. The only evidence of their phantom-like existence would be the newspapers at their doorsteps. Newspaper delivery usually starts at 3am and ends around 6am. The rationale for the early timing is to enable subscribers to read the newspaper over breakfast.

Unfortunately, newspaper delivery service is a fast-disappearing trade in Singapore as more subscribers prefer to read their newspapers online. There are now even newspaper vending machines placed at strategic locations. Nevertheless, newspaper vendors and carriers are part of Singapore's cultural heritage, etched in the hearts and minds of older Singaporeans.

Pitch dark, 3.30am. Bleary-eyed 50-year-old Siok pushed a trolley towards a white minivan parked along the side of the road. Under dimly lit street lamps, its boot opened to reveal newspapers stacked neatly in bundles right up to the roof of the vehicle.

Jason handed her a disproportionately thick stack of newspapers and Siok grimaced under the sheer weight of the stack. With a frayed pair of gloves blackened with newspaper ink, she fingered the stack and drew out exactly 50 copies of *The Nation Times*, 30 copies of *Jishi Zaobao* and 10 copies of *Malay Express*, piling them on her trolley.

The early morning chill attacked her emaciated body. In the still of the pre-dawn morning, her footsteps pounded on the tar soundlessly, leaving no traces except for the soft landing of newspapers on the elongated front porches of the terrace houses.

Through her ten years of plying the Pasir Ris Green Estate route, she knew the exact angle and strength to toss the papers. Too hard and they were wedged on the window ledges. Too soft and they landed near the gates, or worse, on the lawns, heightening the risk of her precious commodity getting ravaged by early morning showers. Either way, she was prepared for an onslaught of complaints, and an inevitable reprimand from Jason. "I'm doing this for my son. I must bear it," she thought.

Once, a full-grown German shepherd broke from its leash and bounded after her. With the fang-baring beast snapping at her shins, she dropped the newspapers and fled a few streets away until its owner whistled and the dog gave up its chase. By then, she was shaking so hard that she collapsed on the asphalt, breathing in rapid bursts, her face drained of colour. Afterwards, Siok got an earful from Jason.

She refused to succumb to tears. She had not cried when her doctor informed her of her bad knee, or when she lost her job as a dishwasher, or when her husband ran away with another woman, so she was not about to cry over a dumb dog. Instead of a head-on clash with Jason, she turned vegetarian and prayed at the temple every first and fifteenth of the month for blessings on Wei's studies and her job.

Whenever it rained, she unfolded a huge piece of tarpaulin and spread it over the newspapers. Siok herself was not spared the torrents, pelting on her gaunt frame. At the end of a thunderstorm, her straggly white hair dripped like a wet mop. When asked, she would shrug, "What to do? I have to make a living. I want to send my son to university." Her newspaper round ended around 5am,

in time for her to rush home to help her son get ready for school. Back home, Siok sat on her sofa and took a deep breath.

She meant to take only a quick nap. Her body, having taken a toll of consecutive days without proper rest, had eased into a deep slumber. Siok jerked awake on the sofa. She blinked at the intensity of the light invading her two-bedroom HDB flat. Through the thin worn-out curtains, light bounced off the white streaks of her hair. She glanced at the lone clock on the wall. Oh no, it's 7am, only 15 minutes to get ready! Thank goodness the school was just a ten-minute walk away. She lowered her aching feet into a pair of cheap plastic sandals.

Her 15-year-old was still fast asleep. Her knees creaked as her thin sandals dragged against the cold ceramic tiles.

"Wei! Wake up! Time for school!" Siok called out as she flicked on his room light.

Wei groaned on his bed. His eyes refused to open.

"Hurry up, late already!" urged Siok, shaking him.

"Mmm ...!" Wei made a guttural sound.

"Come on! It's 7.30!"

"What?" Wei propped himself up, his eyes sharp and accusing.

"Mah, why didn't you wake me up earlier? I'm late!" Wei shouted as he jumped out of bed.

"But Mah, it's 7, not 7.30!" he protested, pointing at the clock in the living room.

Siok shook her head and shuffled to the kitchen to warm up the multigrain porridge. Siok's stomach growled as she opened the refrigerator to take out ground black sesame and sprinkled them over the porridge. Then she poured freshly boiled water into a porcelain cup with Milo powder and stirred with a metal spoon. The spoon clinked on the sides of the cup in protest. With her forehead throbbing, she tottered towards the dining table with the bowl of porridge and cup of Milo balanced in her hands.

Wei was tugging on the second sleeve of his uniform shirt, threatening to tear it at the armpit, his face taut.

“Eat your breakfast before you go!”

“Mah, I’m late!” Wei grumbled.

“Drink the Milo.”

“Mah, the discipline master will scold me. I’ll eat during recess. Bye!”

Lifting his bag, Wei whizzed out of the house.

“Hey ...” Siok’s voice trailed after Wei. She stretched out her hand to pass him his water bottle as he brushed past her. The brusque shutting of the front gate sent a jolt to her heart.

“That boy!” she wailed, wiping off her tears with the back of her wrinkled hand. “I’ll teach him a lesson when he comes back.”

She let out a big sigh at the untouched porridge and Milo on the table. She brought the porcelain cup to her lips and let the warm beverage slide down her throat. “What a waste. Ah, I can keep the porridge for Wei when he comes home after basketball.”

Dabbing medicinal ointment to her temples to drive away the pounding headache, she sat on the sofa, letting her mind wander. Her eyes landed on Wei’s kindergarten graduation photograph on the television console. Siok’s face brightened as she contemplated an image in her mind of a mortarboard on Wei’s head and a scroll in his hands upon his graduation from university, the culmination of her hopes and dreams for her only child. “Wei, he’s so smart! I wish he could be a doctor or lawyer.”

The toils of her unconventional hours of work had sapped her youthfulness away. She could even pass for a 70-year-old, so she avoided looking into mirrors. Photographs of her were sorely missing from the row of framed pictures featuring Wei – when he was a baby, when he was taking his first steps, when he was holding his Primary School Leaving Certificate and when he was taking part in a basketball tournament.

Siok’s primary school education and poor grasp of English had limited her job options. She was a cashier, dishwasher, packer and gardener before landing her newspaper delivery job. With more turning to news on the Internet, the demand for her delivery services had shrunk by more than half. As she pondered how she could afford Wei’s secondary school uniform, books plus English tuition, a crushing pain pulsed and she rubbed her temples in slow circular motions to dispel a vicious headache. She set the alarm clock for 2pm, in time to start preparing lunch for Wei. Soon, her body melted into the sofa and gave in to drowsiness as lethargy consumed her in disturbed sleep.

After lunch, Wei sat at the dining table revising his schoolwork while Siok hammered her head repeatedly with her fists.

“Mah, stop that!”

“Wei, Mah’s having a headache. Help me with my newspaper run tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow is a school holiday. I don’t want to wake up so early!” Wei protested.

“I’ll give you \$20.”

“Deal!” Wei’s face lit up at the thought that he could finally get his hands on the latest game. During recess, he could only stand aside as he watched his classmates battle one another online.

He could not help cursing internally when his mother shook him awake at 3am and she herself returned to bed. Rubbing his eyes, he dragged his feet as he headed out with the trolley in the early morning. “For the sake of my game ...” He kept his mother’s torn knitted work gloves in the pocket of his bermudas, disgusted at their resemblance to a granny’s and thought that they did not fit his manly image. Yet, his mother had insisted that he brought them with him. He was afraid that he might bump into friends from school. “They’ll make me a laughing stock!” Wei thought.

He made long strides as he crossed the road over to Jason's minivan.

"Who are you?" asked Jason.

"Siok ... my mum is not well. I'm here to replace her," said Wei, as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Jason stared at Wei for a while before handing him the stack. "You know the route, young man?" he said, patting his back. "I don't want any complaints." Wei knew better than to argue with him. He simply nodded and told himself, "I'll just do my job and head home to sleep."

Clutching a piece of paper that his mother had sketched for him, he could tell, from a series of crosses and alphabets showing designated houses, where the newspapers should be delivered. After covering two streets, Wei gained momentum in his first solo morning newspaper run.

While tossing a newspaper to a corner terrace house, it landed smack on a black mongrel, awakening it from slumber. It growled at him through the fence with the ferocity of a tiger baring its fangs, shattering the peace of the neighbourhood. "What the ..." he cursed. His heartbeat escalated. Recalling his mother's close encounter with a dog, Wei's first instinct was to run home and hide under the security of his snug blanket. An image of his mother lying down at home, incapacitated, tugged at him when he broke into a run. No matter how hard he shook off the image, it refused to go away.

"I must get my money!" Wei said, and willed himself to turn back to where he had left his trolley. A cold draft yanked the remaining newspapers off his trolley and a few lifted off and flew in different directions. He scrambled after the papers, snatching them up in a frantic attempt to salvage them. The wind sent the first drops of drizzle right onto his precious commodity. He struggled to cover them with the tarpaulin and to secure the whole pile as leaves rustled briskly and tree branches bent over like old men.

"No time to waste!" he thought. His stack disappeared from his trolley at record speed. Luckily, he was one step ahead in finishing his deliveries before the rain poured with a vengeance. Dripping wet, he squatted in a corner in the five-foot way of a shophouse. Shivering lightly in his T-shirt, he dipped into his pockets for warmth and took comfort in his mother's knitted gloves. He took them out, slipped them over his hands and stared at the worn-out threads sticking out of the gloves. A heavy solemnity descended upon him as he wondered how long this pair of gloves would last. As he attempted to stand up, his arm and leg muscles contracted in spasms. He could not imagine how his 50-year-old mother managed to withstand the hardship for so many years without rest days.

"Mah, I will be the man of the house," he had vowed after his father deserted them when he was ten. "I'll protect you." However, as he grew up, winning at video games became more important than keeping his promise to his mother.

"I'll buy breakfast for Mah," he said, shaking off thoughts of his mother's ill health and thumbed the miserable \$2 note in his wallet. When the rain reduced to a drizzle, he dashed to the nearby market to buy his mother's favourite breakfast.

"Mah, your *chee cheong fun!*"¹ he said, as he gently nudged his mother awake.

"Oh! How did the newspaper run go?"

"Jason hardly asked me any questions before he passed me the newspapers. Lucky you passed me the list, or else ..." Wei replied.

"It rained just now?"

"Yes, but I finished before that."

"Are you sure you didn't leave any newspapers out in the rain?"

"Don't worry, Mah!"

¹ Steamed rice rolls, usually served with a sweet sauce or sesame oil and light soya sauce.

Wei and Siok sat down and tucked into the *chee cheong fun* in companionable silence.

“Mah, I’ll go again tomorrow,” Wei offered.

Siok recalled the many times she had refrained from asking Wei to help her. She could not believe her ears. “Really?”

“*Err* ... I want pocket money to buy games.”

“Is that all you can think about?” Siok said, her voice strained, her lips quivering.

For the first time, Wei looked at his ageing mother and saw her straggling white hair and the crows’ feet under her eyes. He remembered her being hurt. He also realised that she had not been smiling or laughing much and he wanted that back.

“All I can think of are my stupid games!” he muttered in self-reproach. “Never think of Mah!” During the recent school holidays, he had asked his mother for permission to take up a part-time job in a fast food restaurant.

“I want to help you earn money,” Wei insisted.

“Wei, I earn enough money for you. You don’t worry.”

“But my classmate also works there.”

“You focus on your studies and go to university. You can take care of me after you finish university and get a good job.”

“I get a good job but at what cost? I don’t want you to fall sick!” he had blurted out.

Wei reached out to Siok’s bony fingers and noted the warmth in her grip and the shine in her eyes. “Mah, I won’t mention the games anymore. And, I’ll help you with the newspaper delivery.”

Author’s Note

I was one of ten participants rushing to meet the two-week timeline to complete a given writing exercise of 1,000 words. This exercise eliminated any lingering thoughts of procrastination on my part as I pounded on my keyboard

frantically to meet the deadline. As a writer, I am in awe of deadlines. I worship them like gods. They spur me to bring my writing to a crescendo. When I was stuck at the 600-word mark, a nudge from my fellow writers was all that I needed to meet the tight deadline before me.

The writing prompt for that week was “Writing a Slice of Life – Describe how a 35-year-old is preparing breakfast for the family”. The prompt led me to think about the mother of one of my students. Her struggles as a newspaper delivery person had touched my heart. As a mother myself, I empathised with her determination to send her son to university and rooted for her as she put all her effort into her job. I visualised what the situation was like when she had to juggle her newspaper runs and make breakfast for her son.

I sought suggestions from fellow writers on how I could deepen the metaphor of the mother as a “phantom” – when she delivered newspapers and in the eyes of her son. One writer suggested erasing her from all her son’s photographs. I found that suggestion quite clever, so I included it.

Having trusted writing friends to give encouragement and feedback is a blessing for any writer. I must admit that receiving negative feedback about my writing can be quite painful, and I may end up having to “kill” my darlings or edit out parts which I really love, but at the end of the day, I know that I will grow and emerge as a stronger writer.

Si Larut

Ismim Putera

Elephants were an important mode of transportation for the monarchy and elite in Malaya (now Malaysia). Besides having them work in plantations, elephants were often involved in important ceremonial celebrations such as the coronation of a Malay king. Elephants were regarded as royal animals and some were further trained to be war elephants. By the mid-19th century, tin ore mining flourished and became a major trade in some Malay states. The elephants were extremely useful for clearing new land for mining sites.

It was noted that Malay animal trainers were very skilful in talking to elephants. They shouted out certain phrases which instructed the elephants to do very specific tasks. In the Malay society, this skill was highly valued for its practicality, and thus learning them was essential. The trainers were also very knowledgeable in taking care of sick or wounded elephants using herbal plants. This unique human-animal interaction was documented in books written by many British colonial administrators who called it the “elephant language”.

One day, an elephant that was being used by the miners escaped into the adjacent jungle. When recaptured it was found to be covered with mud rich with tin.

– Khoo Kay Kim, *Taiping (Larut):
The Early History of a Mining Settlement*

A flash of betel nut red – blood in his eyes.

Long Zahir wipes it away with his sleeve. In the heat of combat, his vision doubles under the rays of the late afternoon sun. Sweat from his brow streams onto his cheeks, dampening his dimples. He blinks multiple times to clear his vision.

Two weeks ago, Si Larut, the royal elephant, had escaped from its pen in Istana¹ Meranti. The unhappy king had decreed that it should be retrieved by any means.

Now, Long Zahir and his men are confronting a herd of angry wild elephants on a grassy plain near Mount Korbu. Si Larut is presumed to be hiding somewhere amongst the bamboo groves stretching all the way to the jungle fringes.

He wipes the remaining smudge with his fingers to get another sharp look at the miracle before him. Another wild elephant is down. A spear had pierced its right leg. He turns his face away from the gruesome wound. The unnecessary killing of these animals is, indeed, a fruitless exercise. The rest of the wild elephants, about 50 of them, have fearfully retreated back into the bamboo groves flourishing at the foot of Mount Korbu.

“*Hob-hob!*” shouts Long Zahir. It means “stop” in elephant language. Senduduk, his pet elephant, lifts her trunk skyward and trumpets loudly to signal the other elephants to stop marching forward.

“We did it, *Tuan!*² We’ve chased them off!” A man shouts loud and clear from afar. The soldiers join in the cry of triumph. They flag their spears with pennants high while others use them as crutches to keep standing upright. They pant slow and heavy, and bleed and swelter in their rattan armour suits.

“Long Zahir, they’ve become too wild. I wish we can stop killing these poor creatures,” mentions Kitang, a senior minister working in Istana Meranti. Apart from being an expert in talking to elephants, he settles taxation and advises Long Jaafar, the King, on matters pertaining to British administration. For the past four days, he has been assisting Long Zahir to devise attack and defence formations using trained elephants. He is at his wits’ end trying to win the battle against those wild elephants. Deep in the recesses

1 An istana is a royal palace.

2 “Sir” or “Lord” in Malay, a respectful form of address.

of his mind, he believes a penumbra of mischievous *hantu hutan*³ might be interfering with their pursuit.

“I agree, Kitang.” Long Zahir blinks rapidly for a few moments. “Those wild elephants are not to be taken lightly. *Hantu hutan* must have made them very violent. I hope Si Larut can protect himself.”

They are known as Hantu Hutan – the Spirits of the Forest – and are as real to the Malays and as much dreaded as the tigers and other wild animals of the forest.

– Sir George Maxwell, *In Malay Forest*.

Rembulan waves at Long Zahir. He is a Siamese slave working in Istana Meranti. He runs forward and assists his master to get down from Senduduk’s back.

“*Tuan*, you’re injured. You must lie down!”

“Bring him back to the tent. I’ll help him defend this place,” orders Kitang sternly. His voice quivers for a moment. He is standing a stone’s throw away from the dying elephant. He can sense the aura of a restless *hantu hutan* crawling out from the circular wound, mocking him. A few moments later, the poor elephant lets out a sickening snort before it is overtaken by complete stillness.

Kitang’s lips are as white as polished limestone. His suntanned face is as rough as stone slabs. A sudden gust of wind blows dust over his left cheek.

“It’s dead,” mumbles a young soldier while closing the elephant’s pearly eyes. He covers the carcass with alternating layers of coconut and banana leaves.

“They’ll be back,” confirms Kitang, straining a smile but his teeth are maroon red, stained by years of chewing young areca

3 Literally means “ghost of the forest” in Malay, also refers to spirits residing in the forest.

nuts. “I can smell their fear and anger from here. They’re hiding behind those bamboo trees. I know Si Larut is there, too.”

* * *

Long Zahir rests on a *mengkuang* mat,⁴ panting fast. The tent is scorched by heated afternoon air. Rembulan pours clean water into a coconut shell bowl.

“*Tuan*, drink this. Your body is burning hot.”

“Thanks.” Long Zahir finishes the water in one gulp. He then lies back on the mat, continuing to groan.

Kitang elbows his way into the tent and eyes Long Zahir with disapproval. “You broke the formation, Long Zahir. That wild elephant could have easily pushed you down from Senduduk’s back. If you had slipped and fallen, you could have been squashed under their feet. Luckily your men distracted the elephants and detoured them towards the bamboo grove.”

Long Zahir’s wide grin falters as he looks at Kitang, whom he regards as his uncle since his adolescent years. It was Kitang who had taught him *silat*,⁵ and, of course, to ride elephants.

“It works, right?”

Kitang stretches his lips into a hard line. “You could’ve been hurt, *Tuan*, that’s all. What am I supposed to tell the King later? Those are not the usual ones that feed on sugar canes.”

Long Zahir closes his eyes and sees swirling red and yellow lights. He replays the events over and over in his mind. He may have won the battle against the wild elephants today, but may not tomorrow. He expected the King to deploy more strong men today but, sadly, none of them have showed up to assist him.

“I didn’t expect catching Si Larut to be this hard.” Long Zahir formulates his thoughts. He has many tactics up his sleeve but

none had really worked against those burly animals.

The elephants are not some lowly animals. They once lived in Kayangan, a mystical kingdom in high heaven. They were sent down to the earth by the gods themselves.

Long Zahir sits up and takes off his shirt.

“How’s everyone?”

“I’ve instructed them to build tents and light up bonfires. The river is just behind the bush, not far from here.” Kitang throws some herbal leaves into a ceramic bowl and grinds it with a wooden pestle.

“Rembulan, put this on your master’s chest and back.”

Rembulan dabs the poultice onto his red skin. A dark green liquid oozes out and stains the edge of the wound. Long Zahir hisses slowly, as if scraping off a stubborn leech clinging on his chest.

“We’ve done well this time, but ...” Long Zahir admits his flaw, “I should not have changed the formation. That was entirely my fault.”

“Si Larut is somewhere near. I can hear his heavy footsteps.” Kitang assures him. “Sleep early tonight. We begin tomorrow morning. Our men deserve good food and rest tonight.”

By sunset, steam and spices fill the air as bowls of *nasi himpit*⁶ are served all around for supper. Long Zahir sprinkles powdered nipa palm sugar into his coconut shell bowl. Misty steam coils around his fingers.

Enough blood has been shed today, from both men and animals, and thinking about it gives Long Zahir bouts of intense headache. Pain like the sting of a thousand centipedes is gnawing at his lower back. Once the sweetened rice satiates his hunger, he looks up only to find Rembulan and Kitang missing. He puts the bowl down, washes his hands and rises from his seat to look for them.

⁴ A mat made of screw pine leaves.

⁵ A collective term for a class of indigenous martial arts from the Nusantara and surrounding areas of Southeast Asia.

⁶ Traditional compressed rice cakes commonly served with peanut-sauce dishes or sweets.

Outside his tent, there is a woman, riding up on a royal horse.

Long Zahir recognises her instantly. She is the messenger-woman from Istana Meranti. She has come to deliver a message, from Long Jaafar, the King, and does not stay long to watch Kitang read it aloud from the paper scroll.

Long Zahir guesses the main contents of the letter – Si Larut has not yet returned to the palace, and the king is gravely anxious about it.

Kitang passes the scroll to Long Zahir. He gives Long Zahir a rare, gainful smile, which readily fades as his gaze flits down to the scroll. The *jawi*⁷ words glitter under the moonlight. From afar, it looks like tiny earthworms squirming in ruler-straight rows.

“He wants us to find Si Larut in just ... two more days?” The penmanship sends red-hot anger which engulfs his cheeks, making the veins in his neck pulse stronger. He reads the other parts of the text aloud. “It is predicted a flash flood will hit the palace if Si Larut is dead ...”

* * *

Not far from the tent, Rembulan is pouring water over Senduduk’s body.

Senduduk, under the moonlight, stands as a silent sentinel watching the men. She stretches out her trunk as if she wants to catch the full moon.

“*Lot!*” utters Rembulan curtly. It means “lower your head”. Senduduk blinks for a few seconds before brandishing her ivory tusks downwards.

“Have you eaten?” Long Zahir’s voice resonates like he is speaking into a hollow bamboo. Rembulan nods briefly.

⁷ A writing system used for writing the Malay language and several other languages of Southeast Asia based on the Arabic script.

“Sorry, *Tuan*. I’ve failed you. I’ve brought a curse upon the palace because of not taking good care of Si Larut.”

“It’s just a threat from the palace. I don’t believe in such superstition. The only minister in the palace that I trust is Kitang. That’s why I brought him here to guide us to find Si Larut.”

“*Tuan*, the king is not happy about this. I’ve failed this time. If we can’t locate Si Larut in two days’ time, I’ll be punished.” Rembulan’s gut feels like it is tightened by thorny vines. He has heard all the stories, of how slaves are severely punished for being incompetent or disobedient.

**Three so-called debt-slaves – a boy and three girls,
all under twenty years of age, had escaped from the
house and custody of the Sultan, and run away ...
The boy was taken into a field and kris-ed.**

– Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham, *The Real Malay*

“No, I won’t allow it. I’m to be blamed as well. I rode Si Larut that evening without my father’s consent. It’s my fault, too, that I didn’t put on the *singkla*⁸ properly. I’ve promised him to bring Si Larut back. And, we’ll bring him back.”

“*Terum puan!*” Rembulan orders Senduduk curtly. She trumpets briefly, bends her front knees to touch the sandy ground, then gravitates her body downwards skilfully behind them. Upon sensing the warmth of her leathery skin, Long Zahir and Rembulan recline their backs against her.

**Malay elephant-drivers, in directing their beasts,
use a kind of elephant language, which comes from
Siam, and seems to be understood by the animals.**

– Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham, *The Real Malay*

Senduduk lives up to her name. She roars like an untamed lion, sending waves of tremors throughout the Malay Peninsula. Senduduk is a reincarnation of ancient animal spirits. Not even a wall of men and horses can stop her if she is to run amok. Only men of royal blood could rein a beast like that. Si Larut is her son, one of Long Jaafar's princely possessions. Si Larut is often displayed at royal weddings, coronations and opening ceremonies of local mining sites.

"In time, the wild elephants will see through our strategy. They'll attack us again, if we let them," Rembulan says soberly.

Words of caution fail to dampen Long Zahir's heavily-spirited mind and body.

"Sip the nipa sugar juice and enjoy the night. You worry too much." Long Zahir then rests his head on Rembulan's lap. He closes his eyes slowly, secretly enjoying the warmth.

"*Tuan*, you must rest in your tent," Rembulan spreads open a sarong and covers Long Zahir's bare chest. Red lines criss-cross over his sternum. A bruised patch marks his lower right chest, possibly hiding a cracked rib.

"It's hot in there. Besides, I can take care of Senduduk and the other elephants. Kitang is inspecting the bamboo grove with the men. We'll take turns to guard the elephants tonight." Long Zahir clasps Rembulan's right hand and lays it firmly on his chest.

Like Long Zahir, Senduduk closes her eyes too, possibly learning to fly in her dream. Rembulan then peers into the distance. Men are still toiling to make camp while some struggle to pound the pungent *ketub-ketub* roots into a mushy pulp, before feeding it to the elephants as a nutritional supplement.

We take a considerable quantity of the roots of *ketub-ketub* and *panggil-panggil* and pound them into pulp, and give them to the elephant in his food

for three consecutive mornings or evenings. This is certain to make the elephant courageous.

– W George Maxwell, *Mantra Gajah*

Cicadas screech in nearby bushes. Frogs in singsong vocals beg for a downpour. Rembulan turns his head to face Mount Korbu, which is cloaked in a greenish and purplish haze.

Rembulan admires Long Zahir's determination to learn the art of elephant language from him and Kitang. Only a week with the elephants and he can order them around effortlessly. Commanding elephants is a tedious task. The commands are mere short phrases in Siamese. The commands will be ignored by the elephants if the learner is not patient enough to synchronise eye contact, voice tone and body language while talking with them.

Long Zahir has fallen asleep on Rembulan's lap. His face is calm despite the stinging blisters all over his body. Even a prince is not immune to insect bites.

* * *

"Shh! He's there! He's alone." Kitang signals the men behind him.

As expected, Si Larut towers over the bushes in the marshy compound, still with his soiled *songket*⁹ caparison. He lifts his trunk several times mid-air, as if worshipping the morning sun.

Long Zahir keeps his back straight, hands folded and eagle eyes looking forward. Rembulan struggles to do the same. He envies his master's ease in upholding that relentlessly firm strength.

"Listen, let's end this. We'll settle this once and for all today. We'll bring Si Larut back before those wild elephants return!" Long Zahir sharpens his gaze.

⁹ A fabric that belongs to the brocade family of textiles of the Malay world. It is handwoven in silk or cotton, and intricately patterned with gold or silver threads.

Kitang enchants a Siamese war cry. His voice booms, even with no intent to shout: “O, the Mandate of Heaven, give me strength and wisdom to command the elephants. My body is the vessel for your divinity.”

Long Zahir’s smile is bowstring-tight and mirthless. His eyes light up with exhilaration on unsheathing his kris.¹⁰ “Our five-day expedition will end today. There’ll be no bloodshed anymore.”

“Bring out only the female elephants. Rembulan, prepare the rattan nooses!” Kitang outlines his plan while eyeing Si Larut walk towards a small river.

Along the river bank, Si Larut is induced to join the society of the three female elephants which are let loose on purpose. He moves forward, sprinkling water on each one of them. Together, they feed on the sprouting sugar canes nearby. Not far from them, on the ground, in some convenient place between two trees, rattan nooses with ordinary running knots lay quietly on the ground.

“*Dee dee! Dee dee! Dee dee!*” A group of men calls out the command words a good stone’s throw away from the elephants. All three female elephants respond immediately to the command. It means “come here now”. They abandon the place and start climbing up the river bank. As predicted, Si Larut follows them from behind. Seizing this good sign, the men form a barricade around them, forcing them towards the site of the nooses.

Urged by the tense environment, Si Larut plants his foot unknowingly into a noose. Rembulan and the men pull the knot and he is caught immediately. He trumpets short regretful screeches and advances a few sluggish steps forward, attempting to free himself. The end of the line fastened to the noose is attached to a heavy mass of leafy branches and acts as a drag to slow his movement. Fatigue soon makes him move slower. His mother,

¹⁰ An Indonesian asymmetrical dagger.

Senduduk, and another female elephant sandwich him on both sides. Kitang then binds all three of them into a set.

An elephant, whether caught with a herd or a noose, is kept tied up until it has been thoroughly subdued and quiet, and will submit to being washed and handled.

– W George Maxwell, *Mantra Gajah*.

* * *

“*Ayahanda*,¹¹ please forgive Rembulan. I need him. He has been working for me for two years. His loyalty is not to be questioned. He’s a good *gambala*¹² and has taught me many elephant words. My training with the elephants has not yet been completed,” pleads Long Zahir. He has been sitting on the cushioned altar for almost an hour. Rembulan kneels behind him, on the bare floor, shirtless, with his wrists shackled behind his neck. “*Ayahanda*, he has helped us to track Si Larut, too.”

Long Jaafar, despite having Si Larut returned safely, is still keen to punish Rembulan for his recklessness.

And somehow, as his heart wrenches, Rembulan feels that Long Zahir is genuine in his plea. He hangs his head low.

“*Ampun Tuanku*,”¹³ Kitang saunters into the chamber with a pair of royal guards.

“Yes, Kitang. What good prophecies have come across your mind today? I’m still thinking about the best punishment to give this Siamese slave of mine.” Long Jaafar turns his face towards Kitang.

“*Ampun Tuanku*. The washers found this black sand from Si Larut’s breast collar. I think this is what the Siamese call *timah*.”

¹¹ A poetic term for father or a senior male relative in Malay.

¹² A herdsman in Malay.

¹³ Literally means “begging your indulgence”, in an archaic form of the Malay language, from *ampun* (addressing the sultan (royal ruler) of a Malay state).

Kitang opens up a piece of folded cloth, revealing black grains of sand.

“Is that true?” Long Jaafar hurries down excitedly from his throne and palpates the grainy-textured sand. Elated, he then sniffs at the mixture repetitively, almost blackening the tip of his nose.

“Oh! Oh! My *Anakanda*¹⁴ Zahir,” Long Jaafar turns around quickly.

“Yes, *Ayahanda*?”

“Unshackle that slave. You can keep him forever. I’ve granted him my pardon on one condition.”

“Tell me the condition, *Ayahanda*.”

“Bring him with you to find the source of this special mud. This is *biji timah*.¹⁵ It’s very precious. It must be from the swampy area where you found Si Larut. I’ll send men to guard you from the wild elephants. Talk to Si Larut in whatever language you want, and make sure he shows us the right place.”

It is on record that, by 1844, tin was exported to Penang from Larut.

– Khoo Kay Kim, *Taiping (Larut): The Early History of a Mining Settlement*

Author’s Note

Many months ago, I came across a posting on Twitter discussing the art of talking to elephants by Malay herdsmen in Perak, a state in Malaysia. I was instantly captivated by such a tradition which is obviously no longer a practice nowadays.

I did some research on the issue and found out that the claim was not fictitious at all. Several English authors, such

as Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham and particularly W George Maxwell, a former British colonial administrator of British Malaya, have written extensively on this matter.

Impressed by the uniqueness of this practice, I decided to write short stories or essays as a way to preserve this long-lost heritage. Hopefully, through works of fiction, I can highlight the beauty of such an art and integrate some elements of this early 19th century practice into Malay society.

While planning for my story, I realised that writing about a group of men talking to elephants is not easy. I needed a strong story arc, which I found when I read about the real case of a missing elephant from a journal article on the early history of the mining settlement in Perak. I used this incident as the foundation for the plot of my story. The story is set in early 19th century Perak in British Malaya, where the tin ore trade began to flourish.

In my story, the characters give a specialised set of commands to instruct the elephants to do a specific task, as described by W George Maxwell in his book *Mantra Gajah*. This usage of the command phrases makes the story extremely realistic and unique. Other minor issues that I have woven into the story relate to human-animal relationship, slavery, animal hunting and abuse and the exploitation of natural resources.

Excerpts from books and a journal are integrated into the story. This creative technique is deployed in order to give further background information on a particular scene or event.

¹⁴ A poetic term for son or younger male/female relative in Malay.

¹⁵ Tin in Malay.