The Politics of Race in Singaporean Short Stories: Alfian Sa'at and Wena Poon

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Focusing on Singaporean short stories by writers Wena Poon and Alfian Sa'at, this article argues that their narratives promote the reader's engagement with the nuances of racialised identity. In the process, race is exposed as a nebulous and multi-faceted construct that is often incorporated into politicised discourses. This article also examines the effectiveness of the short story as a literary form for interrogating assumptions about racial codes and signifiers, and for registering racial sensitivities in processes of narrativisation.

Short stories, Race, Singapore, Wena Poon, Alfian Sa'at

'[T]o write a short story,' William Carlos Williams tells us, 'one must know what he is writing about […] and be writing *what ordinarily one doesn't want to hear*'.[1] Race can be just such a taboo subject. Depicting complex and shifting social settings, the short stories of writers Alfian Sa'at and Wena Poon reveal a searing honesty when grappling with the sensitive topic of race in Singapore. Their writings traverse a gamut of experiences ranging from everyday covert racism to state-sanctioned structural inequalities, all while maintaining vocal registers infused with humour and

[1] Qtd. in V. Trueblood, 'What's the Story? Aspects of the Form', *American Poetry Review* 30, no. 4 (2001): 42. Emphasis mine.

pathos. In this paper, I focus on two short-story collections, Poon's *Lions in Winter* (2009) and Alfian's *Malay Sketches* (2012), in an attempt to answer a specific and a general question. The specific question is how Poon and Alfian, in their differing modes, respond to the socio-political circumstances that prompt their illuminating and often provocative representations of racial issues. The general question, which I consider more speculatively and briefly, is why the form of the short story lends itself as an effective medium in revealing the oft-hidden aspects of racial sensitivities. If G. K. Chesterton is right in declaring that 'fiction is a necessity'—for it serves as a vital arena of civic intelligence—short stories are an essential platform for voicing discomforting perspectives about race and society.[2] My contention is that stories like Alfian's and Poon's negotiate a diverse spectrum of racial issues which often remain undiscussed, encouraging a deeper, more mature engagement with the nuances and complexities of racialized identity in countries such as Singapore.

'Race' in Singapore

To understand the socio-political milieu from which Alfian's and Poon's stories derive, it is useful to contextualise how the concept of race in Singapore has been influenced by state-initiated discourses and policies. As a former British colony that became independent in 1965, Singapore is an ethnically diverse Southeast-Asian city-state of about 5.4 million residents, with a stable racial composition of about 74% Chinese, 13% Malay, 9.1% Indian, and a small population of other groups designated as 'Others'. [3] Yet, as various scholars have noted, the state's categorisation of these 'four official races' based on a rigid Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model involves 'a process of simplification and symbolic representation' that glosses over the extensive diversity within each group.[4] The category 'Chinese' amalgamates various dialect communities such as the Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakkas, despite the groups' differing cultural

[2] G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1902), 10.
[3] 'Population Trends 2013', Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Singapore, 2013, accessed 1 June 2014.
[4] B. H. Chua, 'Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore,' in K. H. Chen, ed., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 169.

backgrounds and history of internecine conflict. Indeed one of the bloodiest riots in Singapore's history was not the 1964 communal riots between Malays and Chinese (which killed fewer than forty people) but the 1854 Great Riots between Hokkiens and Teochews (leading to the deaths of approximately 500 people).[5]

The heterogeneity of other groups has been similarly obscured by the imposition of the CMIO model. For instance, the Peranakans—a community of combined Chinese and Malay ancestry, descended from Chinese traders who married local women from the seventeenth century onwards—are subsumed under the category of 'Chinese'.[6] Such categorisation belies the fact that the Peranakans historically maintained a distinct cultural identity, speaking a patois of their own known as Baba Malay (a fusion of Malay and Hokkien) and practising a culture that synthesised Chinese, Malay and European influences.[7] Likewise, although the term 'Malay' denotes a community marked by lesser heterogeneity than the Chinese, it still describes people of Bugis, Minangkabau, Boyanese and other ethnicities together with those of indigenous Orang Laut or Malay Archipelago descent.[8] The category 'Indian' combines all South Asians regardless of their religious and ethnic diversity (including those of North and South Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage), while 'Others' is self-evidently not even a racial term but a general catch-all description for those who cannot be classified under the other three categories.[9]

This racial categorisation has had certain far-reaching implications. While the state's educational and social policies promote a narrative of multiracial harmony, as reflected in the annual 'Racial Harmony Day' celebrations observed by schools across the country, the effect is paradoxically that 'people are made more conscious of

[5] 'Hokkien-Teochew Riots (1854)', National Library Board, Singapore, 2011, accessed 1 June 2014.
[6] J. Henderson, 'Ethnic Heritage as a Tourist Attraction: The Peranakans of Singapore', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003): 30, 36.
[7] J. E. Khoo, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam and Kuala Lumpur: Pepin, 1996), 23.
[8] R. Goh, 'Christian Identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between State Controls and Transnational Flows', *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 1 (2009): 3, 4.
[9] Ibid., 3.

their origins, rather than less'.[10] The constant reinforcement of the four-race CMIO classification, enforced by measures such as racial identity recording on the National Registration Identity Card (NRIC), also translates into an implicit pressure to conform to the official institutionalised taxonomy, which itself constitutes an effacement of in-group variation. State policies on language and education further entrench artificial categories, with students required to study one of the national languages of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil (known as 'mother tongues') as an additional language: Peranakan children, for instance, have to study Mandarin in school because they are classified as Chinese, even though they would be more likely to speak Baba Malay or English at home.[11] Racial classifications thus effectively demand 'a certain linguistic and cultural violence' so as to 'fit' individuals into the system.[12] The claim that Singapore's 'four official races' co-exist in balanced harmony has to be tempered by the recognition that such racial categories are imagined constructions, which necessarily require the inhibition (or repression) of other alternative ethnic or cultural identities.

Lions in Winter and *Malay Sketches*

This brings us to the question of how the Singapore-born, US-based novelist Poon and the Singaporean poet-playwright Alfian respond to such perpetuation of racial categories. The limits of similarity between their short story collections should first be acknowledged. While Poon mainly depicts a (largely Chinese) Singaporean diaspora living in the US, UK, Australia and Canada, Alfian offers glimpses into the everyday lives of the Malay minority in the Chinese-majority society of Singapore. The titles of both collections also resonate differently. *Lions in Winter* alludes to the physical and cultural displacement of immigrants from Singapore—widely known as the 'Lion City'—who must navigate the foreign terrain of temperate regions.[13] *Malay*

[10] J. Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990: The Cultural Politics of Pluralism in a Multiethnic Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 41.
[11] J. Henderson, 'Ethnic Heritage as a Tourist Attraction', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003): 36.
[12] R. Goh, 'Textual Spaces, Social Identities and Race in Singapore Advertising', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 136.
[13] E. Tay, 'A Singaporean Diaspora?', *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, 7.2 (2008).

Sketches, however, borrows its name from a similarly titled 1895 collection of anecdotes by Frank Swettenham, colonial governor of the Straits Settlements in the early twentieth century.[14] Poon straddles local and global perspectives to reflect on a racialised Singaporean society with greater clarity; Alfian enacts a post-post-colonial re-envisioning of lived experience from a racial minority's insider point of view.

Despite their differences, both writers share an impulse to problematise prescriptive state-endorsed ideals, encoding tacit insights about race in their stories through their choice of narrative strategies. One strategy involves the undermining of racial stereotypes. This may appear counter-intuitive to some: one otherwise glowing review of *Malay Sketches* finds fault with Alfian for reinforcing some 'negative stereotypes of the Malay community', based on the assumption that 'the limited timespan each story has' demands the need to 'quickly convey plot points and themes to the reader'.[15] Yet Alfian never limits his Malay characters to promiscuous youths or drug abusers; he also depicts Malay graduates, professionals and wealthy private-property residents, as in the stories 'Shallow Focus' and 'A Howling'.[16] One of Alfian's techniques, it seems, is to introduce negative stereotypes self-consciously for the purpose of subverting them. Take for example his story 'Cold Comfort'. Although the narrative appears to centre on a Malay unwed teenage mother—an almost clichéd representation of youth delinquency—the narrative perspective does not belong to her but to her interviewer, a Malay doctor called Razmi. Pre-empting the response of his Chinese Singaporean medical colleague Cheryl, Razmi questions himself:

> Was it because of people like her [the teenage mother] that Razmi chose to study medicine? […] He felt angry all of a sudden, as if she had undone all the work he had put in to cultivate an image agreeable under the gaze of those like Cheryl.[17]

Razmi's anger stems in part from insecurity, owing to the perception of Malays as backward and lower in socioeconomic status compared to other races. As a 2011

[14] I. M. Isa, 'Foreword', in A. Sa'at, *Malay Sketches* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012), 13.
[15] L. Lee, 'On the Subject of Race', *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, 11.3 (2012).
[16] A. Sa'at (2012), 73, 113.
[17] Ibid., 54.

survey report of the Malay-Muslim community states, the community's progress in education, employment and other economic indicators 'is not perceived as being as encouraging as Singapore's progress in general'.[18] Razmi consequently represents a kind of anxiety resulting from self-doubt and alienation. The postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon notes that such alienation usually affects the professional middle classes, who are most vulnerable to what he called the 'lactification principle' or the process (originally referring to black people) of whitening oneself to assimilate into the dominant white community.[19] In Razmi's case, racial difference from the Chinese majority engenders a fear of marginalised social identity, which results in a desire to satisfy the majority's gaze by conjuring a self-image acceptable to them. Through Razmi, Alfian destabilises any of the reader's preconceived notions about negative Malay stereotypes, while highlighting the angst and perturbation felt by individuals who are interpolated as members of minorities vulnerable to perceived surveillance.

Another strategy relates to the evocation of emotional resonance. If Alfian demonstrates how racial minorities tend to be subjected to scrutiny, Poon throws prejudice itself into the spotlight by focusing on the chauvinism that some from the majority race can display. In her story 'The Shooting Ranch', the Chinese Singaporean narrator Sarah, who is married to a white American, travels with her daughter Anouk to visit Singaporean relatives living on a farm in Nevada. During dinner with the relatives, Sarah and Anouk have to endure the sneering taunts of the obnoxious family patriarch Henry. Speaking to Sarah, Henry refers to Anouk with a racial slur: 'So your daughter here is a *pak zheng-lah*?'[20] In an aside to the reader, Sarah explains the offensiveness of the epithet:

> I knew that word too. It was the word in the *Hokkien* dialect for mixed race. Actually, it sounded more like a veterinary term and literally meant to inject (an animal) with genes for a desired breed. I was Singaporean enough to know that even in Singapore people did not use that word on people of mixed races. Maybe only behind their backs.

[18] 'Perception Survey on the Malay-Muslim Community in Singapore', Association of Muslim Professionals (Singapore), 2011, 155, accessed 1 June 2014.
[19] D. Hook, 'Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, 'Psychopolitics' and Critical Psychology', LSE Research Online, 2004, 98, accessed 1 June 2014.
[20] W. Poon, *Lions in Winter* (London: Salt, 2009), 127.

'What's that, Mom?' asked Anouk sullenly, fixing her famous stare to Henry.

'Oh, I think Uncle Henry wants to know if you are half-Chinese and half-white. Which she is.' I said, turning to Henry. 'I really must compliment you on your wife's cooking.'[21]

Sarah disguises the pain of hearing racist abuse by masking it under the appearance of nonchalance, abruptly changing the subject by issuing an admiring remark to the very person who has insulted her child. The scene indicates Poon's awareness of the objectification and awkward social position that people of mixed race in Singapore have sometimes had to contend with. Individuals of mixed European and Chinese descent have been seen by some in the Chinese community as 'a living betrayal of lineage, physical evidence of abandoning the family line and name', and 'subverting the purity/authenticity' of the racial bloodline.[22] By representing a transgression of socially upheld and state-sanctioned racial boundaries, mixed-race individuals may be regarded by Chinese chauvinists as a threat to homogenised categories of race and ideas of stable racialised identities. Poon deplores such perceptions as vulgar simplifications. In the story, the real 'animal' is not Anouk but Henry, whose wilful and boorish behaviour reveals his own bigotry and inability to transcend essentialised conceptions of race.

Similarly tackling concerns about racial 'miscegenation', Alfian shifts the reader's attention to its political implications. His story 'The Convert' centres on Jason, a Chinese Singaporean army regular who converts to Islam to marry his Malay-Muslim fiancée. After his conversion, he is quickly transferred to another military unit. Implicit in the narrative is the rarely discussed but widely known fact that the (mainly Chinese Singaporean) leadership of the Singapore Armed Forces is concerned about the loyalty of Malay-Muslim personnel, if conflict were ever to erupt between Singapore and its neighbouring Malay-Muslim-majority countries.[23] Malay-Muslims are thus usually not assigned sensitive positions in the military, such as being a

[21] Ibid.
[22] Z. L. Rocha, 'Multiplicity within Singularity: Racial Categorization and Recognizing 'Mixed Race' in Singapore', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2011): 101.
[23] Lee (2012).

fighter pilot.[24] This is reflected by a terse statement from the 2011 survey report, which states that 'issues with Malay/Muslims in the military are also identified […] as areas where the community does not enjoy the same opportunities as other Singaporeans'.[25] In Alfian's story, Jason is treated as suspect, because his marriage equates to a *de facto* act of union with the Malay-Muslim community. Two years after his marriage (and his transfer), a producer in an editing room reviews film clips intended to be part of a montage for Singapore's National Day Celebrations:

> And then Jason appeared on the monitor. He was wearing his army uniform, with his green infantry beret. He stared straight into the camera, and in a slow, measured tone, said, 'I will defend my family. My beautiful wife, and my one-year-old son.'
>
> The producer thought this was the most heartfelt and sincere testimony, and slotted it right at the end of the montage. It helped that one could almost detect tears filling up the soldier's eyes.[26]

The irony and emotional resonance of the scene is evident. Unbeknownst to the producer, Jason's touching declaration not only affirms his protectiveness towards his family but also conceals his personal history of subjection to unjust treatment. Jason's 'sincere testimony' is employed in the service of a state that has engineered a vocational transfer which he can neither control nor protest against. Jason's matrimonial ties further reflect the increasing prominence of Chinese-Malay relationships as a theme in the region's literature and the arts. One example is the Malaysian film *Sepet* (2004), about a Chinese boy and a Malay girl who enter into a romantic relationship tested by racial pressures and social obstacles.[27] The portrayal of such relationships highlight how racial discourses, too often politicised, can ride roughshod over the personal and intimate connections between individuals, whose passions are not constrained by the limiting and circumscribed boundaries imposed by racial categories.

[24] Ibid.
[25] Association of Muslim Professionals (Singapore) 2011, 156.
[26] A. Sa'at (2012), 18-19.
[27] Interestingly, '*sepet*' is a Malay word that, in the film's context, refers to the 'slit eyes' of the Chinese. See Yasmin Ahmad, Sepet, Malaysia: MHZ Sdn. Bhd., 2004, VCD.

Both Poon and Alfian further underscore the veiled tensions that can characterise relations between racial majorities and minorities, which in a Singaporean context especially concern the Chinese and Malay communities. In Poon's story 'Dog Hot Pot', the Chinese Singaporean narrator Christopher is a US-based graduate student. Returning to Singapore where he visits the house of a Malay journalist friend and his wife, Christopher speaks to their eight-year-old daughter Nadia:

> Later on, when her parents were in the kitchen, little Nadia came over to me and whispered in my ear, 'My grandmother says, Chinese people smell like pig.'
>
> I feigned astonishment. 'What about me? Do I smell like pig?'
>
> She sniffed. 'Don't know. Are you Chinese? You live in America.'
>
> 'Yes, I'm Chinese. I'm from Singapore just like you.'
>
> 'Mummy says you're American. So how can you be Chinese and Singaporean and American at the same time?'
>
> I got that a lot, and not just from eight-year-olds.[28]

In other contexts, little Nadia's furtively whispered statement might be perceived as racially inflammatory, and alluding to Islamic proscriptions regarding pigs as unclean. Here the statement can be recognised as the mischievous utterance of a child exposing the prejudices of older family members. The knowing adult narrator humours the child's innocent naiveté ('I feigned astonishment'), but the irony is that most other adults are just as oblivious to the overlapping shades of possibility when identity is concerned ('I got that a lot, and not just from eight-year-olds'). One is reminded of novelist Kazuo Ishiguro's response to a question about the extent to which he identifies as either Japanese or English: 'People are not two-thirds one thing and the remainder something else. Temperament, personality, or outlook don't divide quite like that. The bits don't separate clearly. You end up a funny homogeneous mixture.'[29] Poon's insight is that the experience of one's racial identity need not be singular and one-dimensional but can instead be mediated by multi-

[28] W. Poon 2009, 20-21.
[29] Qtd. in Graham Swift, 'Kazuo Ishiguro', *BOMB Magazine*, 1989, accessed 1 June 2014.

dimensional perspectives, contingent on one's social, cultural and political context.[30] One can be 'Chinese and Singaporean and American at the same time', or as Alfian depicts in 'The Convert', Chinese and Malay and Singaporean at the same time. Recognising identity as dynamic, protean and multi-faceted, Poon and Alfian undercut the false dichotomies which threaten to divide racial majorities and minorities.

Race, albeit a nebulous construct, nevertheless remains deeply embedded in politics. Alfian is particularly alert to this observation. Currently, tenets of racial equality are enshrined as part of the national ethos in Singapore. The Singapore National Pledge, recited by thousands of students every morning, affirms that Singaporeans 'pledge [themselves] as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion'.[31] Yet Alfian suggests that a disjunction persists between egalitarian ideals and political realities. In his story 'Two Brothers', the Malay Singaporean brothers Helmy and Hazry discuss an incident in which their mother could not ask for directions on a bus because the bus driver—a migrant from China—lacked English language skills. While Hazry dismisses his mother's experience as 'an isolated incident', defending the state's importation of 'cheap labour', Helmy perceives a political agenda behind the shifting socio-cultural landscape.[32] The older Helmy tells his sibling:

> This place is changing. It's not the same place we grew up in. […] [W]hat about that whole policy to keep the Chinese in Singapore at 75 percent? Because they have the lowest replacement rate, then their numbers need to be topped up by the Chinese from overseas. So what does that say to you? Which comes first then? Being Singaporean or being Chinese? [33]

Helmy's sentiments reflect the racial minority's mounting unease about feeling like a foreigner in one's own country. Such discomfort arises from linguistic differences with new migrants, as well as the impression that the state is primarily concerned about preserving a stable racial equilibrium, prioritising racial interests above national identity. The problems are compounded when race and language are

[30] See B. D. Tatum, 'The Complexity of Identity: "Who Am I?"', in M. Adams et al., eds., *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.
[31] 'National Pledge', National Library Board, Singapore, 2012, accessed 1 June 2014.
[32] A. Sa'at (2012), 197.
[33] Ibid.

intertwined. As observers note, the 'high number of Mandarin-speaking migrants' from around 2000 onwards has contributed to the sense 'that Singapore [has] grown markedly more Chinese in character', and this 'encroaching Sinicization' has led to an apprehension on the part of non-Mandarin-speaking racial minorities.[34] A significant proportion of Malay-Muslim respondents to the 2011 survey also 'cited the influx of foreign talent [denoting recent migrants] as an issue that puts Singapore in the wrong direction'.[35] Alfian demonstrates his keen cognisance of such trepidation. By juxtaposing Hazry's sympathetic stance towards the state with Helmy's political cynicism, Alfian deftly illustrates the complex, controversial aspects of policies that may be demanded by economic imperatives but which fuel social resentment about the perception of declining multiracial inclusiveness in Singapore. Alfian unravels the various levels of suggestiveness behind the politics of race, even as he exposes how racial categories can be subject to deconstruction. In the stories of Alfian and Poon, just as races are shown to be susceptible to admixture, so do elements of fiction and reality combine and coalesce to convey stinging social commentary about race in Singapore, challenging hegemonic state discourses that sometimes go unexamined.

Race and Short Stories

Having considered Alfian's and Poon's stories in some detail, we arrive at the broader question about the effectiveness of the short story as a literary form for interrogating racial categories. We may have noticed that the narrative strategies of the two writers—such as the destabilisation of stereotypes, the infusion of emotional resonance, or the uncovering of suppressed tensions—are not actually unique to the short story. The plethora of classic novels dealing with issues of race that employ such techniques suffices to demonstrate the point. Consider Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), among

[34] S. Leong, 'No Longer Singaporean', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4 (2011): 564.
[35] Association of Muslim Professionals (Singapore) (2011), 153.

others.[36] Does this mean that the weighty topic of race requires the longer form of the novel to do it justice in all its ethical, social and political dimensions? Valerie Trueblood, however, reminds us that brevity in itself 'does not shrink the subject'.[37] Indeed the miniature quality of the short story has been the topic of much discussion, with especial attention paid not just to the quantitative but qualitative differences between short stories and longer narratives.[38]

A brief sample of contemporary scholarship on the short story would provide the groundwork for an understanding of such differences. In *The Lonely Voice* (1962), Frank O'Connor famously distinguished between the novel and the short story as 'distinct literary forms', arguing that while the novel usually depicts people in society, the short story is populated by characters from what he termed 'submerged population groups' (or 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society').[39] A defining trait of the short story, he maintained, was not brevity but 'an intense awareness of human loneliness'.[40] Yet focusing on the aspect of length—an essential criterion of the short story for writers like Edgar Allan Poe—is Mary Louise Pratt's seminal article 'The Short Story: The Long and Short of It' (1981). Pratt begins from the premise that shortness is not an intrinsic quality but a relational concept: 'short' has meaning only when accompanied by the idea of 'long'.[41] Describing the short story as cast in the role of 'little brother' to the novel, not merely in physical terms but also in terms of artistic prestige, Pratt regards the novel as the yardstick that has conditioned both the development and reception of the short story.[42] Dominic Head, however, questions Pratt's assumption that short story length is relative only to the novel, pointing out that a story provides a short experience relative to many things—such as watching a film—and the novel is 'only one point of comparison, however

[36] See C. E. Wilson, *Race and Racism in Literature* (Westport, Greenwood: 2005).
[37] V. Trueblood (2001), 42.
[38] See N. Friedman, 'What Makes A Short Story Short?', *Modern Fiction Studies* 4, no. 2 (1958): 103–17; also W. Nelles, 'Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?' *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (2012): 87–104.
[39] F. O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House, 2011), 87-88.
[40] Ibid., 87.
[41] M. L. Pratt, 'The Short Story: The Long and Short of It', *Poetics* 10 (1981): 181.
[42] Ibid., 186–92.

important'.[43] For Head, the 'length question' should instead be superseded by 'a consideration of technique'.[44]

This emphasis on technique is significant. As Valerie Shaw observes, the short story reflects the characteristic ability to fuse 'apparent extremes of style', blending self-conscious literary devices and colloquial spontaneity through the '"essentially poetic" compression of a single narrative'.[45] Jorge Luis Borges even goes so far as to claim, 'Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential.'[46] One possible conception of the short story is hence what Trueblood calls 'the *thing expressed in its essence*'.[47] A short story, as she notes, may be 'taken up mentally in one inhalation, as most novels cannot comfortably be, and remembered as a *thing*'.[48] Like many poems, short stories are compact enough to inscribe or brand themselves upon the reader's memory. The short story, then, is 'essential' in that it functions as the crystallisation of a narrative, etching its own mark in the mind of the reader.

The significance of this function becomes apparent when considering short stories about race. In its varied depictions of the 'submerged population groups' that O'Connor describes, the short story illustrates the fragmentation that its characters experience. Paul March-Russell explains that the short story can be best understood as a kind of fragment, given its tendencies 'to snap and to confound readers' expectations, to delight in its own incompleteness, and to resist definition'.[49] One insightful instance is Toni Morrison's short story 'Recitatif', named after a recitative style of vocal declamation and centred on the lives of Twyla Benson and Roberta

[43] D. Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.
[44] ibid., 4.
[45] V. Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1983), 5-6.
[46] Qtd. in Daniel Halpern, ed., *The Art of the Tale* (New York: Penguin, 1986), v.
[47] V. Trueblood (2001), 40.
[48] ibid., 41.
[49] P. March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), vii.

Fisk, two women who first meet as eight-year-olds at an orphanage.[50] While the reader is told that one of the women is black and the other is white, *it is never indicated which is which*. As Morrison herself puts it, the story is 'an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial'.[51] By confounding the reader's expectations for stereotypical racial signifiers when visualising characters, Morrison complicates easy assumptions about racial identity. Critics have noted that readers frequently seek to 'categorise' or 'assign' racial identities to characters if the narrative leaves such identities unclear, but Morrison challenges this impulse by foregrounding the *reader's* implicit prejudices rather than the characters' biases.[52]

Short stories on race, like Morrison's, are 'essential' in Borges' sense because they traverse the space between racial binaries to compel readers' self-reflection in a succinct and memorable fashion. Like Morrison, Poon and Alfian also occasionally withhold information from the reader. In Poon's 'The Shooting Ranch', Anouk's mixed-race identity is not revealed until halfway into the narrative, while in Alfian's 'Two Brothers', the incident on the bus between the siblings' (Malay) mother and the Chinese bus driver is never related in detail but only indirectly alluded to.[53] That which is left unsaid is often just as important as that which is articulated, particularly when it comes to matters of race. Short stories, like those of Alfian and Poon, adeptly dramatise this tension between concealment and communication to prompt readers' deeper reflection about racial codes and signifiers.

In multi-ethnic societies coming to terms with issues of identity and social cohesion, fears about the potentially destabilising effect of racial sensitivities may mean that discussions about race tend to be elided rather than pursued. If, as Philip Holden

[50] T. Morrison, 'Recitatif' in M. Golden and S. R. Shreve, eds., *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race* (New York, Anchor: 1996), 87.
[51] T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), xi.
[52] S. G. Benjamin, 'The Space that Race Creates: An Interstitial Analysis of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"' *Studies in American Fiction* 40, no. 1 (2013): 88.
[53] W. Poon (2009), 123; A. Sa'at (2012), 196-97.

argues, short stories in Singapore 'defamiliarise the reader from the social space of the city-state', consequently exposing the necessity of interrogating ideas about the postcolonial itself, such narratives also reveal the concomitant need to examine entrenched assumptions and perceptions about race.[54] Texts that contest or resist racial stereotypes and categories, after all, serve as crucial points of entry into a difficult but urgently needed conversation on racial issues and politics. This analysis has established that the short stories of Alfian and Poon are clear examples of such texts. Exposing race as a difficult, problematic construct with its own knotty, multifarious significations, the two writers challenge and dispel constricting racial stereotypes and definitions. If 'definitions belong to the definers, not the defined', as Morrison maintains, short story writers are empowered to re-define perceptions of race, inspiring an imaginative exploration of oft-unspoken racial sensitivities.[55]

[54] P. Holden, 'Unmaking Sense: Short Fiction and Social Space in Singapore', in M. Awadalla and P. March-Russell, eds., *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49.
[55] T. Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), 190.