Political Memoirs As Contrapuntal Narratives

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Said Zahari was a journalist and leftist political activist who was detained without trial for seventeen years in Singapore during the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew. This essay examines his memoir, Dark Clouds at Dawn, and argues Said Zahari’s principled political position was informed by his religious beliefs and his status as a Malay man of letters. His memoirs challenge dominant national narratives portraying Malay identity during the 1950s and 1960s as ethnically insular or chauvinistic, as Said Zahari always held a cosmopolitan and coalitional outlook. His memoirs remind us that ethnic and racial identities, both historically and in the present, cannot be essentialized and require analysis in relation to social and political struggles.

This essay examines Dark Clouds at Dawn, the political memoirs of Said Zahari, a leftist activist and one of the longest serving political prisoners in Singapore. Unlike ‘left-wing politician’ or ‘radical dissident’, ‘leftist activist’ refers to persons opposed to colonial and postcolonial power structures but who do not completely align themselves with secular ideologies such as socialism and communism. The problem with the term ‘leftist activist’ in the context
of Singapore is that the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), founded by Lee Kuan Yew, has so often been regarded on the political spectrum as a ‘left-leaning’ (Chua 2010, 335) party with ‘moderate leaders’ (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 17), as opposed to more radical or far-left parties such as the Barisan Sosialis (BS), which split from the PAP and was often portrayed as being a front for the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Left-wing activity not in line with the PAP’s moderate position is often conflated with communist or Marxist agitation. Alternatively, in this essay, I emphasize that leftist activists adhered to more than a political ideology. They drew inspiration from local religious beliefs and other native traditions and combined them with secular ideologies to justify their actions in resistance to state power. Said Zahari fits this mould: although he championed anticolonial struggles and became a member of the Partai Rakyat Singapura (PRS), he opposed ‘left-wing extremism resulting from shallow ideological understanding’ that led to such tragedies as the Cultural Revolution in China (2001, 204). His political views were also shaped by his identity and profession as a Malay journalist for Utusan Melayu, ‘the first Malay-owned Malay-language newspaper’ that fought for ‘three causes’: ‘religion, people and country’ (2001, 33). To be a leftist activist fighting for social justice, therefore, was not the same as being a communist advocating seditious violence, which was precisely the false charge laid against Zahari to justify his seventeen years of detention.

Said Zahari’s memoirs document his and his fellow activists’ forgotten stories and their abortive struggle to realize Singapore as a ‘nation-of-intent’ (Shamsul 1996, 328) upholding social justice and political equality,1 a struggle that could not prevail in the face of the national government established by Lee and his PAP cadres favoured by Britain and other western powers. Zahari’s book Dark Clouds at Dawn is part of an emerging corpus of life-writing by former leftist Singaporean political figures who were once detained without trial or forced into exile. On the whole, these texts challenge Lee’s portrayal of left-wing figures as ‘faceless men’ dedicated to ‘nasty and bloody business’ (1998, 247) and revolutionary violence driven by ‘Chinese chauvinist sentiments’ (1998, 290). Instead, many dissident memoirs describe the tempered, sincere, reasoned and reasonable activities, visions and perspectives of men and women who refused to go along with the schemes and machinations of colonialists and their postcolonial inheritors (Tan and Jomo 2001; Teo 2010; Tan, Teo and Koh 2009). Despite attempts to depict left activists as treacherous individuals who must be incarcerated and isolated lest their ideological delusions contaminate the developing and liberal national body, writers such as Zahari demonstrate how the personal is embedded within the public and the political, and that their radical beliefs and actions sprang from the same historical circumstances that gave rise to more authoritarian and ruthless forms of power. Narratives of postcolonial nationhood are incomplete without the voices of those who have been marginalized and

1 Shamsul defines nations-of-intent as ‘a more or less precisely defined idea of the form of a nation, i.e. its territory, population, language, culture, symbols and institutions … A nation-of-intent may imply a radical transformation of a given state, and the exclusion or inclusion of certain groups of people. It may also imply the creation of a new state, but it does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule on the part of the group of people who are advancing their
oppressed because of their politics and race. These voices are now being heard and read.

Zahari’s memoir offers an alternative depiction of Singapore’s political history, challenging and subverting the logic of state-sponsored accounts of nation-building and race relations. As Chua Beng Huat points out, the culture of capitalist development established by the Singaporean state in the early years of nationhood required that three arbitrary categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian) be created for the management and essentialization of race (Chua 1998, 34–35). This particular form of ‘multiracialism’ or race management leads to disempowerment because ‘it pushes race out of the front-line of politics while according it high visibility in the cultural sphere’ (36). Dark Clouds at Dawn takes issue with the Singaporean state’s essentialization of race by depicting Zahari’s personal struggles as both deeply political and reaching across racial boundaries through his camaraderie and friendships with various leftist figures before, during and after his incarceration. It informs the common reader of the suffering of leftist and other political activists often kept from public knowledge and thus exposes the deeply racialized and politically unjust ideas and methods used by leading national figures in Malaysia and Singapore to seize control and consolidate power.

Zahari’s memoir can thus be read in terms of what Edward Said calls contrapuntal narrative. To write or read ‘contrapuntally’ means to have ‘a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history ... and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts’ (Said 1993, 51). As a contrapuntal narrative, Zahari’s memoir interweaves personal and political insights and experiences with the dominant historical account of Singapore’s national development, illustrating that Singapore’s state-crafted ‘identity can never exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions’ (Said 1993, 51). The memoir performs two kinds of opposition and negation: first, it dramatizes the experience of displacement and dislocation among subalterns in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Moore-Gilbert 2009, 54). Such a dramatization occurs in Zahari’s memoirs through his accounts of persons who were subjected to the oppressive practices of colonial and postcolonial regimes. Zahari depicts himself as representing those who suffered from persecution due to his convictions and the biased policies of Singaporean and Malaysian politicians. His agonizing life story is written in such a manner that it represents leftist activists and their ‘struggle to uphold social justice, to eliminate oppression, cruelty and tyranny and to free Malaya (including Singapore) from colonial shackles’ (Zahari 2001, 118).

Second, Zahari’s memoir destabilizes two kinds of racialized and individualized discourses closely associated with Singapore’s postcolonial growth as a nation and society. On the one hand, there is what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 31) describes as the discourse of transition, ‘of which the over-riding
themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism.’ In Singapore, as in Malaysia, this discourse has come in the form of published reports, studies and personal recollections that track the two countries’ journeys from Third World colonies to developed nation-states. Advocates of the transition discourse attribute Singapore’s development to strong governance, efficient technocracy and a compliant citizenry relentlessly committed to economic growth and social cohesion (Huff 1994; Lee 2000). This technocratic notion of development is also deeply racialized. This transition discourse relies on the idea that the minority Malay community necessitates constant state management and surveillance. Malays in Singapore are made to believe that, if left unmanaged, they are susceptible to the lure of religious extremism and insular communal politics. This further diminishes their already backward status in a highly developed country (Aljunied 2011, 147–163).

Zahari’s memoir challenges this discourse by showing that his identity as a Malay and a Muslim is not confined to religious or sub-ethnic particularities and is instead transnational and cosmopolitan in outlook. Moreover, Zahari maintains that, during the turbulent years of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, the communal tensions that pitted Malays against Chinese and Indians in Malaya and Singapore were part of a ‘neo-colonial scheme’ by ‘Western imperialists’ that ‘rais[ed] the racial political elements of Melayu Raya (Greater Malay Nation)’ in order ‘to create fear and anxiety among the non-Malays’ (2001, 155). As a result, Malays in Singapore are economically worse off than other ethnic groups and viewed with suspicion by the state because they ‘might be sympathetic to their Muslim brethren in neighboring countries’ (Aljunied 2011, 151).

Hand in hand with this racialized transition discourse is what I term a valiant discourse that extols the heroic deeds and devoted lives of Anglophone nationalist elites who assumed positions of authority during the years immediately after Singapore’s independence (Asad-ul 2009; Desker and Kwa 2011; Tan 2009). Valiant discourses embellish the virtues of founding fathers of the nation while obscuring many of their policies that may have led to social tragedies and personal suffering. Valiant discourses are narrative devices structured within an epic plot that romanticizes the life story of selected political elites as saviours of the nation and defenders of its inclusive spirit (White 1973, 8). Singapore’s valiant discourse coincides with the racialization implicit in the nation’s transitional discourse, a point that Lee Kuan Yew’s memoir drives home: ‘We were a Chinese island in a Malay sea. How could we survive in such a hostile environment?’ (1998, 23); ‘We [the PAP] led [Singaporeans] out of the depths of despair in the 1960s into an era of unprecedented growth and development ... mov[ing] from Third World to First World standards in one generation’ (2000, 143). Such discourses function, as Philip Holden aptly puts it, ‘within the nation as
documents of – and indeed, by being read, incitements to – the production of citizens of the new nation-state’ (2008, 5).

I focus on two main features of Said Zahari’s contrapuntal narratives. I begin with a discussion of the dramatization of the author’s experience of displacement and dislocation, followed by an examination of how his contrapuntal narratives have the effect of subverting the transition and valiant discourses that have gained strength in Singapore and Malaysia through the years. In discussing these two main features of Zahari’s contrapuntal narratives, I highlight the author’s unique rendering of his background as a Malay man. Zahari conceives his own Malay identity as intimately linked to socioeconomic destitution and political marginality. He also sought to present the Malay identity ‘beyond the notion of ethnicity with identifiable markers’ (Maznah and Aljunied 2011, xiv) defined by the ruling states of his time. I end with brief reflections on the challenges faced by writers such as Zahari in reinterpreting Singapore’s path to progress and why, despite these challenges, contrapuntal narratives such as his are a necessary remedy to the imbalance in the official accounts of Singapore’s pasts.

The critical strength of Zahari’s memoirs comes from his narrative structure that interweaves broader sociopolitical contexts with his experiences as a private individual, a journalist and a political figure. The text is divided into seven parts: the first provides details about his early life and influential major events in colonial Singapore. The second part delves into his travails as a journalist, while the third part provides vignettes of persons and parties with whom he associated. It is only in the fourth and fifth parts that we encounter details about his detention, his struggles in prison, and the collateral effects of his incarceration upon his family. The sixth and seventh parts are reflections on events that occurred while he was writing his memoirs. The memoir closes with a set of poems written in prison, representing his unjust imprisonment in a deeply personal and lyrical voice.

Throughout the memoir, Zahari develops the general argument that the sociopolitical contexts in which he worked were hostile to leftist activists. In Singapore, as in Malaya (later, Malaysia), leftist activists were cast as ‘fanatics’, ‘extremists’, ‘communists’ and ‘radicals’ who sought to challenge the moral economy of the ruling regime. They were construed as wishing to stunt ‘progress’ and ‘development’ through their outright refusal to submit to the rule of capital that colonialism set in place. Not only did this terminology of terror homogenize leftist politicians and intellectuals as communists (when in fact many, including Zahari, were not members of the Communist Party of Malaya), but also it dehumanized them, denying them any possible social role or political contribution. Dark Clouds at Dawn takes issue with this arbitrary denial of human subjectivity and political relevance on the part of the postcolonial Singaporean state, thereby ‘mak[ing] concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to
each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences’, and in doing so ‘enables us to appreciate [ideology’s] power and its continuing influence’ (Said 1993, 33).

### Dramatizing Dislocation and Displacement

Said Zahari’s dramatization of his traumatic experience of displacement and dislocation is part of a growing body self-writing by other leftist activists such as Teo Soh Lung (2010), Tan Jing Quee and Francis Seow (1994) published in recent years (Teo and Low 2012). The socioeconomic displacement caused by a working-class family background, the lack of employment opportunities arising from political stigmatization, the suffering and death of loved ones who have been stigmatized in turn by association, the betrayal of fellow activists, and, at the peak of all of this, the many years of unwarranted detention are among the themes that these leftist activists bring into sharp focus in their texts. Such texts illustrate how leftist activists were seldom in control of the successive events that overtook them and that they were oftentimes ‘internal exiles’ (Amos 2005) or displaced vagrants within the boundaries of their own nation-state. But in writing contrapuntal narratives against the heavy hand of state power, these leftist activists also dramatize the persistence and development of emotional and affective ties with their family, friends, colleagues and fellow detainees. These connections contradict official descriptions of left-wing dissidents by humanizing them; they also show that their unjust detainment has broader implications beyond that of the detainees themselves.

Said Zahari’s experience of displacement and dislocation is dramatized in his political memoir in several ways. The first is by way of bringing to light his struggles as a child born into a poverty stricken family. Secondly, he narrates his eventful ventures with fellow journalists at Utusan Melayu and the difficulties they faced from increasing government opposition to their attempts to maintain press freedom. Third, he tells of his exploits with left-wing politicians and detainees who are of different races or ethnicities and who displayed varying commitments to the cause of upholding social justice. In every instance of dislocation, imprisonment and isolation, Said Zahari elaborates how he sought to maintain a sense of belonging, emplacement and community.

Zahari expounds upon his displacement arising from being born into a disadvantaged minority community – the Malays – and the problems of structural racism and ethnic stereotypes. Malays were regarded as ‘the least favourite child’ in Singapore and were given the least assistance by colonial and postcolonial states because of their perceived passiveness and supposed docility (Aljunied 2011, 164). Zahari cements this point by noting that, as
a Malay born in a majority-Chinese country, personal problems and structural marginalization struck him early. He was a sickly child, prone to fever and colic. The cure for his condition, according to a local healer, was for his mother to have him ‘dumped in the dustbin’ (Zahari 2001, 5) for a while and then taken home. This story, recounted to Zahari by his brother, comes back to him while he ‘sat in solitary confinement’ in 1967, his ‘fourth year as a political detainee’ (4). The childhood memory foreshadows Zahari’s future problems as an adult when he is dumped by the colonial regime into difficult situations as a journalist and later into prison by the post-colonial government of Singapore.

Furthermore, economic destitution hangs over Said Zahari’s life. His mother supported five young children on her own; however, such severe circumstances brought his family closer together while imbibing a strong sense of social responsibility in him. Also, contrary to the perceived ‘educational malaise’ among Malays in modern Singapore (Rahim 1998, 208), Zahari had aspirations ‘to become a schoolteacher … a highly respected career in the eyes of Malay society’ (Zahari 2001, 15) and showed an aptitude for learning other languages such as Javanese, Hokkien, Japanese and Chinese (21).

Zahari also dramatizes his displacement and dislocation by highlighting the demise of his family members and the suffering of his fellow political detainees. This corresponds to what Moore-Gilbert (2009, 17–33) calls ‘relational selves’ that often appear in postcolonial life-writings by male authors, where the narrator’s struggles are linked to the hardships of others in order to show that their personal anguish is tied closely to the collective suffering of a given community. Such narrative techniques are also evident in Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs, which illustrate how his family and upbringing prepared him for a life of political authority: due to paternal incompetence, as Lee himself ‘grew older, [his mother] began consulting [him] as the eldest son on all important family matters’; ‘this taught [him] how to take decisions’ as the ‘de facto head of the family’ (1998, 34) and, later on, head of the nation. While Lee’s narrative is teleological, whereby heading his family becomes a training ground for leading the nation, Said’s accounts of his childhood and family appear in flashbacks interspersed with descriptions of his political struggles and unjust detainment, showing how much those closest to him suffer in relation to his own hardships. While Zahari was imprisoned, his youngest child was born (2001, 237), his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent treatment (238–239), and his mother, who raised him single-handedly, died without him being able to attend to her (256). His poignant account of his mother’s funeral brings to mind the heterogeneous community of his childhood in Singapore:

I swam back, in my mind, to the happy days of yesteryear, when grandpa and grandma were still around, their Hainanese friends, Apek and his son, Ai Thong,
at the workers’ quarters of the Botanical Gardens, my mother and her three sisters, Saiyah, Kenek and Khatijah merrily preparing food for Hari Raya! I saw them all in my mind’s eye. Those were indeed happy days, poor as we were. When I returned to this world, I carefully covered my mother’s face with the batik cloth, bade her farewell, and left the room with a heavy heart. (Zahari 2001, 257)

Zahari’s remembrance takes issue with the dominant discourse of multiracialism in modern Singapore in which each racial group has distinct boundaries of language, culture and responsibility. In Zahari’s memories, different races and cultures coexisted and mingled as relational selves, without artificial boundaries, and his mother’s death marks the end of a more harmonious existence.

Ironically, it is at the height of Said Zahari’s displacement and dislocation – his years spent incarcerated without trial as a victim of Operation Cold Store – that he found a version of this earlier, harmonious community through his close friendships with fellow detainees from different races and walks of life. While he taught the Malay language to other detainees, he started learning Mandarin from Chinese activists and intellectuals:

When I recall my days learning Mandarin in prison, I consider myself the luckiest student around, as I had many teachers, one after another, all well qualified, teaching with dedication, sincerely and for free. All my Mandarin teachers were released before me. Nevertheless, after I was released in 1979, we renewed our cordial and close friendships. (Zahari 2001, 203)

This account further unsettles the Singapore state’s depiction of post-Second World War Singapore as a site where the communalist passions of the Malay and Chinese reigned supreme and were overcome through the PAP government’s leadership. In fact, ‘mutual cooperation between ethnic, religious and ideological groupings was, arguably, a distinct feature of the island’s social geography’ even in moments of tension, unrest and difficulties (Aljunied 2009, 69).

Said Zahari’s narratives of imprisonment as a condition where his own self and his political solidarity were empowered rather than broken challenge the desired outcomes of the Singaporean state. Ironically, imprisonment strengthened his commitment to leftist activism. The prison was a place where new forms of collective action and alliances emerged and where new skills were learnt, enabling leftist activists to articulate their life stories and causes in ways more potent than they possessed prior to their arrest (Aljunied 2012).

Zahari remarks that, in Changi Prison, detainees approached their predicament with professionalism and camaraderie, forming a ‘management committee’ to look after their collective welfare (2001, 197), making ‘rules with regards to daily activities’ and organizing ‘language classes, social and cultural activities, discussion groups, etc.’ (201) so that their minds would not languish
in despair. Zahari recalls urging everyone ‘not to lose heart, but instead [to] continue with the struggle’ (200), a political struggle he had been fighting ever since working in the newsroom of *Utusan Melayu*.

**Professionalism and Political Consciousness**

As a journalist and later chief editor at the leading Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, Said Zahari called for social reforms and equality in both Malaysia and Singapore. Driven by the motto of upholding ‘religion, people and country’ and ‘defending press freedom’, *Utusan Melayu* had an ‘anti-colonial stance [that] was very clear’ (Zahari 2001, 63, 52); it was considered, from the 1940s until the 1960s, a ‘thorn in Britain’s colonial flesh’ and a fierce critic of the Singaporean and Malaysian postcolonial states led by PAP and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), respectively, both of whom resented how Zahari and the newspaper would ‘not [be] controlled by any political party’ (57, 73). The newspaper was staffed with literary luminaries and activist intellectuals who gave Zahari a sense of belonging to the noble cause of speaking truth to political power amid many threats to the newspaper and its staff:3

I saw the entire staff of *Utusan Melayu* in Singapore and the reporters all over Malaya... as fighters for the nation, religion and country through the spirit they infused into the paper at that time... They took on the greatness of the *Utusan Melayu* itself, with its strong nationalistic role in the Malay society. (Zahari 2001, 40)

Zahari’s years of service at *Utusan Melayu* helped him develop a broader conception of Malay identity, one that contradicts Joel Kahn’s argument about a shift in Malay identity. Kahn (2006) suggests that, up until the mid-twentieth century, Malays had a peripatetic and cosmopolitan outlook that was unbounded by belongingness to a given place and interlinked via regional and international Muslim networks. This changed in the 1950s with the development of a hegemonic nationalist and racialized discourse that ruled out other possible interpretations of Malay identity.

Said Zahari’s worldview, however, goes against Kahn’s evaluation. As a journalist and an editor in a challenging, even hostile, sociopolitical environment, he reshaped his notions of Malay identity into one that was cosmopolitan, open and inclusive. His wide range of reading material included books such as *The Great Conspiracy against Russia* and *Ten Days that Shook the World*. His circle of close friends expanded greatly to incorporate people such as R. K. S. Vas, Chee Kon Lin, Patrick Chee and Sit Yion Fong, who were working with other English and vernacular newspapers (Zahari 2001,
Indeed, Zahari saw his vocation as a Malay journalist going beyond the needs of a narrowly defined readership with the same race and language and in terms of what Antonio Gramsci calls an ‘organic intellectual’, one whose political consciousness springs from a combination of race, religion, education and professional skill. Zahari’s critiques of the colonial state’s policies, and his proffered solutions to political and economic problems, were formed by his experiences in ‘practical life, [and] as constructor, organizer, “permanent outsider” and not just a simple orator’ (Gramsci 1971, 10).

In this section I focus on how Said Zahari’s Malay identity is intimately connected to his sense of himself as a man of letters and a leftist activist fighting for the freedom of the press against a receding British colonialism and an emerging national authoritarianism. There are three important junctures in Zahari’s professional and political life as narrated in his memoir where he sought to interrogate transition and valiant discourses. I begin by discussing his coverage of important political events as a journalist for Utusan Melayu, followed by his analysis of his camaraderie and friendship with Lim Chin Siong and his decision to enter politics as president of the Partai Rakyat Singapura. The last section delves into his personal encounters and conflicts with authority figures, particularly Lee Kuan Yew, and his attempts to demystify and deconstruct the heroic image of this founding father of Singapore.

Contrary to the claims made by Lee Kuan Yew that Utusan Melayu was ‘a vehicle of pan-Malay–Indonesian nationalism’ (2000, 213), Said Zahari asserts the newspaper he once led was not guided by ethnic insularism even though it was influential in highlighting issues relating to the Malays. As a journalist, Zahari was also active in defending the plight of the poor and the disenfranchised who were denied their rights. For example, he played a crucial role in defending farmers who were banned by the Malaysian government from planting crops as a means of survival. An editorial by Zahari helped initiate ‘negotiations with the government’ that did not lead to a solution, and even increased tensions between the newspaper and leading Malay politicians who ‘began to look askance at the Utusan Melayu for siding with the landless farmers’ (Zahari 2001, 64). Nonetheless, this is a clear example of Zahari’s broader class politics that transcends ethnic or racial loyalties.

Beyond highlighting Malay problems, Zahari was highly critical of western imperialism and gave much space to reporting about anticolonial movements in Southeast Asia and beyond. The contrapuntal aspect of his journalism is most evident when he describes his coverage of US aggression against Cuba. He correctly saw the Bay of Pigs incident as part of a wider US imperial project, with connections to contemporary US and French expansion in East Asia and Indochina (Zahari 2001, 70, 53). He also pointed out that such Euro-American imperialism was made possible by the collaboration of local leaders who were taking over in the wake of colonialism. Tunku Abdul Rahman claimed that the British-inspired Greater Malaysia project (a union
of Singapore, Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei) had to be hastily realized because the social and political ‘momentum’ of national independence was so ‘swift in developing’ (Tunku 2011, 94). In contrast to Tunku’s opinion that the hurried creation of this new nation-state was an inevitable outcome of history, Zahari stresses that the Greater Malaysia plan ‘was to be used to curb the sweeping current of the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist uprising not only of the peoples of Southeast Asia in particular, but those of Africa and Asia generally’ (Zahari 2001, 154).

Just as he presents a counterpoint to Tunku’s assessment of the Greater Malaysia plan, Zahari also undermines the transition and valiant discourses in Lee Kuan Yew’s political memoirs through his brief yet insightful exposition of his friendship with Lim Chin Siong. Lee portrays Lim as undoubtedly a ‘communist united front leader’ (2000, 714), but Zahari provides a corrective to this depiction by asserting that Lim was a ‘symbol of the genuine left-wing democratic movement’ and that the British colonial government and PAP ‘ignored all laws of logic by branding him a communist, linked to the illegal CPM [Communist Party of Malaya] and its armed struggle’ (2001, 166). While Lee’s memoirs present Lim as a charismatic trade union leader who tried to ‘engineer a collision’ and ‘generate more popular hatred’ between Singapore’s ‘Chinese-speaking population’ and the colonial and national governments, setting the stage for a communist revolution inspired by China’s experience (1998, 203), Zahari points out that Lim was not a Chinese chauvinist or communist lackey. He actively cooperated with Malay leftist activists and encouraged Zahari himself to lead the PRS, a political party that was both multicultural and socialist.

While he was in the PRS, Said maintained close contacts with Lim, who was part of the Barisan Sosialis (BS), and through their conversations developed a larger vision of a multicultural and egalitarian Malaya. They both explored the possibilities of the Cypriot–Turkish power-sharing agreement as a model for a future Malay–Chinese relationship in Malaya: ‘Lim Chin Siong and perhaps the BS too were making contingency plans for the future of Singapore. Should the merger with Malaya fall through, Singapore would have to decide its own future. And perhaps, in such situation, a system of governement à la Cyprus could be a model’ (Zahari 2001, 130). This anecdote is a counterpoint to Lee’s assertion that only he and his PAP-led coalition stood for a truly ‘multiracial Malaysian Malaysia’ against other parties such as Tunku Abdul Rahman’s UMNO, which demanded ‘a completely Malay-dominated Malaysia’ (1998, 522). Dark Clouds at Dawn reminds readers that, historically, other political parties such as Zahari’s PRS and Lim Chin Siong’s BS also had egalitarian and multicultural aspirations for Malaysia and Singapore that were forgotten when British-backed leaders such as Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew seized the day.

Zahari’s description of his encounters and conflicts with Tunku, Lee and their various lieutenants exposes the flaws of valiant discourses. His memories
of his encounters with Lee Kuan Yew during the *Utusan Melayu* strike he helped organize illustrate his critique. From his own recollection, Lee once served as the newspaper’s legal adviser and once saw it as a ‘friendly’ publication (2000, 213). However, as tensions rose between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Lee regarded the newspaper has having ‘been bought by UMNO’ and helping its Malay political masters in ‘mount[ing] a campaign to work up a sense of grievance among the Malays’ living in Singapore (551). Nowhere in his memoirs does Lee mention that, under Zahari’s leadership, *Utusan Melayu* actually staged a strike in 1961 against its board of directors that was ‘now completely controlled by a few UMNO individuals’ who, with the implicit support of Tunku Abdul Rahman, thought that the newspaper ‘should belong to UMNO and should only serve that political party’ (Zahari 2001, 73). In an attempt to prevent the strike from being broken by the newspaper’s editorial office in Singapore, Zahari and his colleagues appealed to Lee Kuan Yew, their former legal counsel, for assistance. Lee ‘ignored [their] request’, refusing to reply to their telegram or to meet Zahari in person even though Lee’s PAP prided itself as ‘the pro-worker socialist party’ in Singapore (Zahari 2001, 110, 111).

Furthermore, when Zahari and Lee finally did meet outside Singapore’s Parliament House in 1961, Lee issued a veiled threat, urging Zahari to ‘find appropriate employment’ outside *Utusan Melayu* and to avoid a ‘drift’ into politics, which would ‘make [Lee’s] work more difficult’ (Zahari 2001, 111). Thus, it is not surprising that when Zahari did indeed drift into the leadership of the PRS, he was swept up by Operation Cold Store and detained without trial. Zahari’s encounter with Lee also reveals the latter as a shrewd player who saw both Said’s PRS involvement and ‘the *Utusan Melayu* strike as an unexpected scene in a political drama’ that ‘could threaten his own political agenda’ (Zahari 2001, 111, 112). Hence, Lee would publicly claim that Said Zahari ‘had been imprisoned for years as a “communist” and not because of [his] activities as a journalist’ (Zahari 2001, 119) and that he was being detained without trial because he had ‘refused to renounce violence as a political instrument’ (219). *Dark Clouds at Dawn* offers a version of important events omitted in Lee’s political memoirs that not only explains the principled political stance taken by *Utusan Melayu* against UMNO’s influence, but also exposes the false charges made by Lee’s PAP government against Zahari and other detained leftists.

**Conclusion: Bringing Contrapuntal Narratives into the Mainstream**

Contrapuntal narratives such *Dark Clouds at Dawn* dramatize the experience of displacement and dislocation suffered by leftist activists even as they turn
the tables on the various assertions that emerge from transition and valiant discourses. As an emerging genre of alternative histories, they expose the cynical and often self-serving strategies of political figures lionized for liberating and modernizing Singapore. More than that, contrapuntal narratives highlight alternative trajectories of the lives of ordinary Singaporeans, while rehabilitating the personal reputation of shamed individuals through the expression of political passions that go against the conventions of other types of historical writing. Moreover, writers of contrapuntal narratives such as Said Zahari expand the reach of audiences by appealing to their emotions, feelings and a clamour of suppressed stories.

Yet the postcolonial Singaporean state’s swift and punitive reactions against contrapuntal narratives over the past four decades have given rise to a culture of fear and self-censorship (Loh 1998; Rajah 2012). This discourages other possible depictions of the country’s history, while making contrapuntal narratives in the public sphere appear erroneous and misleading. However, there are signs that contrapuntal accounts such as Said Zahari’s are gaining more ground in the hearts and minds of younger Singaporeans. A documentary by Martyn See about Said Zahari was officially banned in Singapore but posted on Youtube in 2009 and has received over forty-five thousand views. It is possible that Zahari’s poetic words will move more people towards the truth: ‘How powerful this giant force / The height of service and dedication … history is truth / The course of history no one can stop’ (2001, 305).

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