

CRISES

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“Blessing in disguise.... there’s a blessing in this.”

“Well, what is it?”

CRISES

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translated by
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cerekayasa

Bangi

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Crises is a translation from a novella entitled *Kegawatan*; first translated and published in *The Nurse & Crises* by Thukul Cetak in 2017.

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translator's note

Faisal Tehrani's name was introduced to me in an acrimonious fashion. The lecturer in my weekend religious classes condemned Faisal's proposition that Shiism was the first grand religion of Islam to arrive in the Malay Archipelago. Little did I imagine then, that I would eventually meet Faisal in person, not for his famously controversial writings, but in his capacity as a human rights advocate.

In that first meeting, Faisal candidly relayed an anecdote where an old lady confronted him.

"Faisal, you went for hajj, and yet you've become liberal."

"Well, that's only one hajj. Wait till you see me after a second one," he quipped.

That sums up his boldness about change and his transparency in writing. Faisal never euphemizes his stance, in spite of any literary techniques he might employ. His worldviews are clearly laid out, wherever on the ideological spectrum he may be. This journey is fascinating to observe for one who is never afraid to state and stand in conviction.

I had not appreciated how radical his evolution was, until *Kegawatan*, which I translated to *Crises*. A fiction framed

within a semi-biography is an experimental structure that sets imagination within a present-day context. *Crises* examines the various layers of crises: the psychological and physical crises in times of apocalypse, the ideological crises of opposing characters, and the internal crises of an individual confronting his past self and embracing his transformation.

The fictional apocalyptic *Crises* epitomises Faisal's attitudes in his early years of writing. Replete with aspirations of Islamic purity and glory, this is posited as an alternative to a Western-centric conception of modern life that only promises disillusionment. It hints at postcolonial indignation, where the vestiges of that history are embodied by the newly-minted elite of English-educated Malays, while the native language and culture are relegated to second class.

Hence, the central theme of the fictional *Crises* is hegemony of the mind, a reaction against the prevailing inferiority complex of indigenous cultures. The search for pride and inspiration is apparent in the final chapter of the fictional *Crises*, which presents a vision of the fulfilled Malay potential and celebrates the diaspora that has spread across the world.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the fiction was written at a time when the Iranian Revolution was still fresh in contemporary consciousness. The event was a powerful symbol of a rejection of Western influences in favour of Islamic rule, which sparked a modernist-Islamist movement in Malaysia that carries on till today. In fact, it is interesting to note that many of

the sentiments expressed in this fiction still resonate clearly, if not more pronouncedly, in the present-day Malay psyche. Not least of which include themes of misogyny, the sexualization of women, and the normalisation of rape that are unfortunately prevalent.

The fictional *Crises* is also a critique of modern development, a premonition of its vitiating effects on human values and the environment. The surge of industrial development and consumption in recent decades has caused the world to suffer from climate change. Thus, the possibility of such a dystopian future is not precluded from our imagination.

This story is contained within Faisal's personal narrative, which brings us back to present day Malaysia. It is an introspection of his life as an ideologue, a lament against the state of religious control and censorship in Malaysia, and the ignorance of the international literary circle on these issues altogether.

These important themes are rarely discussed directly in Malaysia, for fear of an authoritarian regime that closely monitors the information available to the public. The encroachment of rights can only be approached obliquely, as any vociferous condemnation will be regarded as a threat to public harmony, arbitrarily determined by local authorities. This was the case with Faisal. While discussions of philosophy, rights, and political ideologies have expanded around the world, these have been systematically choked out in Malaysia over the

last few decades.

Crises demand attention on these issues. In an international market saturated with dystopian fantasies, the appeal of this story is not in the cataclysms but in delving into the minds of those who conceive Islamic aspirations as the antitheses of Western hegemony. It is for those who are curious to step outside the Western context of the world and into the current sensibilities of Malay Muslims and the struggle for moral rectitude that defies absolutism.

The task of a translator is to convey these narratives in all their connotations without compromising the flow, comprehensibility, aesthetics, or loyalty to the author's literary style. My priorities in exercising judgement are in that order. It is always more challenging with literary works, where certain words lose their nuance, aesthetic quality, and potency in another language. Malay is a highly metaphorical language that characterises the traditional sense of Malay gentility. Meanings are typically alluded to through imagery rather than technical accuracy. The word '*kegawatan*' itself describes heightened anxiety in a state of peril; however, it is also a noun that means crisis. Faisal employs the latter pervasively throughout the story, hence my decision to render *Crises* as its title.

Faisal's mastery of the Malay language is evident in his use of poetic lyricism in the repetitive phrasing structures common to the language in order to emphasise nuances. This adds to the richness of the narrative. Unfortunately, these sentence

constructions translate awkwardly in English and therefore must be foregone. Furthermore, words that do not exist with the same connotations in the English lexicon to establish a meaningful nuance had to be neglected entirely, in the interest of efficacy. Stylistically, this is a loss. However, these are minor sacrifices in what is ultimately a larger work of literature. Lastly, the most important consideration in reading *Crises* is to embrace and critically evaluate these characters, the facets of Faisal in conversation with himself, that encapsulate the struggles of contemporary Malay Muslims with modernity and ethnoreligious ideals. *Crises* dives into these layers to enrich the reader's understanding of the people in this corner of the Malay Archipelago and to challenge their perspectives.

preface

Six times, my writings were banned. Mads, you asked me how I felt when I got the news that my book was blacklisted by the authorities? Was I anxious? Defeated? Troubled?

I stood in front of myself, and he asked: Hey, what was your first one?

Crises. That was the first one. Mads remembered it too. I told him about it passionately in my letters to Denmark. I described my entire thought process at that time. Strangely, Mads had never forsaken me, despite feeling, perhaps, that my worldviews were bereft, conservative, or bound too strictly to cultural and religious factors.

I wrote it when I was 16. If I remember correctly, yes, I wrote it at age 16. I kept the manuscript in the drawer. I only published it in 2010, within a collection of stories entitled *Tiga Kali Seminggu* (Three Times a Week). In 2015, *Tiga Kali Seminggu* was banned by the authorities; therefore, *Crises* was banned too. So, the original *Crises* in Malay were outlawed at the behest of Malaysian authorities.

Mads asked me, how might one perceive the religious saturation of my literature? Could it be paraded in the West,

where Islam is confronted with many interpretations and connotations? Would it not scare the readers?

I stood in front of myself, and he asked me: Must you shed Islam from your writings to gain international readers?

My other self stood firmly and blurted out a reply. Similar to what I wrote in response to a French literary journal, *Revue Jentayu* No. 4, “Cartes et Territoires” (2016); I told them:

“I think it is difficult for me to escape Islam in my writings. My first degree was in Islamic studies. My doctorate topic was Islamic literature in Malaysia and Indonesia. As a person, I had my own quirky journey from an Islamist to a ‘Progressive’ Muslim. During the journey, I have absorbed ideas and discourses from Salafism to Mystical Islam, Shi’ism, and Liberal Islam. This, I think, is infrequent in Malaysia, as Muslims are moving towards conservatism. This is why, among other reasons, readers tend to misconceive my writings for a certain school of thought. They might have read me selectively, not the whole body of my work. I believe men of letters should experiment with everything, especially ideas. Take this novel I am writing currently; it is about the inspiring journey of a human rights defender and the space he occupies. The novel in progress reflects me. I was a cultural relativist long before I became an accidental human rights defender. How did I change? It was by delving through my own traditions. I transformed into a new me, a universalist. I believed that human rights were Western-oriented and that we should have our own mould. But the more I looked into our

oral literature, the more I saw universal values. For instance, I see rights lessons in Malay proverbs, and freedom of expression in folklore, and in fact, I found the only Malay exegesis, Tafsir Nurul Ihsan supporting the very idea of freedom of religion; to the extent of allowing Muslims to abandon their religion, if they think it is not central to their lives anymore. I think, my recent works are neither a rejection of the West nor a rejection of Islam, but instead locate myself on a 'bridge' between these two extremes. This, I believe, is the 'correct' formula. I am not writing for others; I am writing for my own people, for Malaysians, and this is a far more constructive vision for the future of Malaysia than the government's race-based ideology or the secular elites' pandering to Western liberalism. In the context of form, my stories are not just stories; they are also views and opinions, and to state my cause and case, it is usually written in sermon dialogues, a heavy didactic approach."

Mads smiled. So it was your academic side that spurred you to change, my friend? That is, the more you dug into your heritage, the more you found universality?

I only replied: We'll see each other in Aarhus.

Mads asked again, if I had fears after being banned six times. What more, considering my alienation, nobody paid any attention to the bans. I told him:

I think those books, six altogether, were banned as I have positioned myself ideologically against the current of the Malaysian government's 'Islamism' project. The authorities

might state it using their own terms or excuses, such as ‘deemed to contain elements that could confuse Muslims and cause moral harm’ or ‘found to be prejudicial to public order and contained elements that could confuse and harm the faith of Muslim’. Take *Sebongkah Batu di Kuala Berang* (the Inscribed Stone of Kuala Berang) for instance. From my research, I found that the first vein of Islam to reach this region was Shia Islam. I planted the idea in the novel. This fact was too disconcerting in an era of proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In addition, I proposed in the novel that Muslims should stop spending money to build mosques and instead produce more films about their own sides of the story. Of course, this was written during the journey I mentioned earlier, so the reader can detect hints of rigidity here and there. But my point is that in Malaysia, Institutionalised Islam is represented by government agencies such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, which will always try to regulate every possible aspect of our daily lives. By challenging the status quo, even celebrated writers like me can get into trouble. I was a celebrated author in Malaysia. The bans were my ‘fall from grace’, it was an experience that merely strengthened my resolve to champion the marginalized. Being banned in Malaysia is lonely. We all know that literature must be free from political control. However, the banning of my books shows that literature must also be free from religious control. It’s not like you’re Salman Rushdie, getting special attention from the highest-ranking literary elites. It’s just lonely, especially

when you're from Malaysia, where our rich body of literature has always been neglected by international literary elites for centuries. So, nobody cares. You stand and fight alone. You shout helplessly, but nobody listens. You travel outside, telling these narratives, hoping they'll adopt you, but people seem to be more interested in Langkawi and Kinabalu. I have six banned books. It's like you've been stabbed in the heart six times. To illustrate how bad this is, four works by Nadine Gordimer, the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, were banned under apartheid rule. But Malaysia is not under apartheid rule. Malaysia sells herself as a moderate country. How bad is the ban in this country? Very bad. The ban is under Section 7(1) of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984. The ban was also in accordance with Section 8(1) of the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984. According to subsection 2 of Section 8 of the Act, anyone found to have printed, imported, sold, or be in possession of banned books in this country can be jailed for not more than three years or fined not exceeding RM20,000, or both. As I stated, being banned in Malaysia is lonely.

Mads then replied with only a brief email: The progressive Faisal vs. the previously conservative Faisal. You really are strange, my friend. You seldom pick fights with people. But instead, you chose to fight yourself. Now that's an intriguing crisis indeed!

More than twenty years ago, when I was still a teenager, I was eager to state my opinions. I believed that literature would be

an avenue for me to enlighten others on the state of the nation. Certainly I was still on the journey, as Mads said in his emails and relentless questions. Unlike other teenagers, I bought myself an old typewriter and started clicking away letters to describe my feelings. I conjured characters who were always in conflict. Possibly they were facets of myself. More critically, these characters emerged to challenge myself. As if appearing in the search for sanity and reason.

It was a craft I laboured over. At a young age, I aspire to leave my mark on the world atlas of thoughts.

What did I write? Here, this is what I created for self-reflection. Who cares now that it's banned in Malaysia?