

**LOVE EACH OTHER FOR; NOT IN SPITE – A much needed-conversation on transforming racial tolerance into genuine appreciation**



A scene from *Brown is Haram*, a highly-lauded play dissecting the nuances of the Singaporean minority experience

(Source: <https://artsequator.com/sept-fest-brown-is-haram/>)

***When language divides us***

Often, my tongue slips into *bahasa pasar*<sup>1</sup> while watching a Bollywood movie with my grandmother, or on the final stations on the Downtown line, in hushed tones, discussing a secret of mine with my best friend. It is comfortable, easy to roll words along my tongue into vowels and consonants, and to breathe them - until it isn't.

*Aunty, one teh siu dai*, and she mutters Mandarin phrases that I nod at. Habit. I didn't mind sharing stares with a senior volunteer, expecting me to transcribe the fast-paced Mandarin discourse between him and an elderly, Chinese man, until I waited till the very end to tell him, *I don't understand Mandarin*, and he implored me, *why didn't you tell me earlier?* I didn't mind when a neighbour asked curiously *are you mixed? you look fair* and all I did was shyly smile, *no, I am not*. I didn't mind when a stranger who approached me insisted that *Malays are usually very kind*, only to lure me into a scam, and I wondered if there was a vocabulary to encapsulate what this was (not a clear-cut, backhanded compliment; so what was it?).

A rhythmic, piercing anaphora begins *Brown is Haram*:

"Brown is being the first in the family to go to university. Brown is Mendaki scholarship. Brown is we are good enough. Brown is never good enough. Brown is self-doubt. Brown is

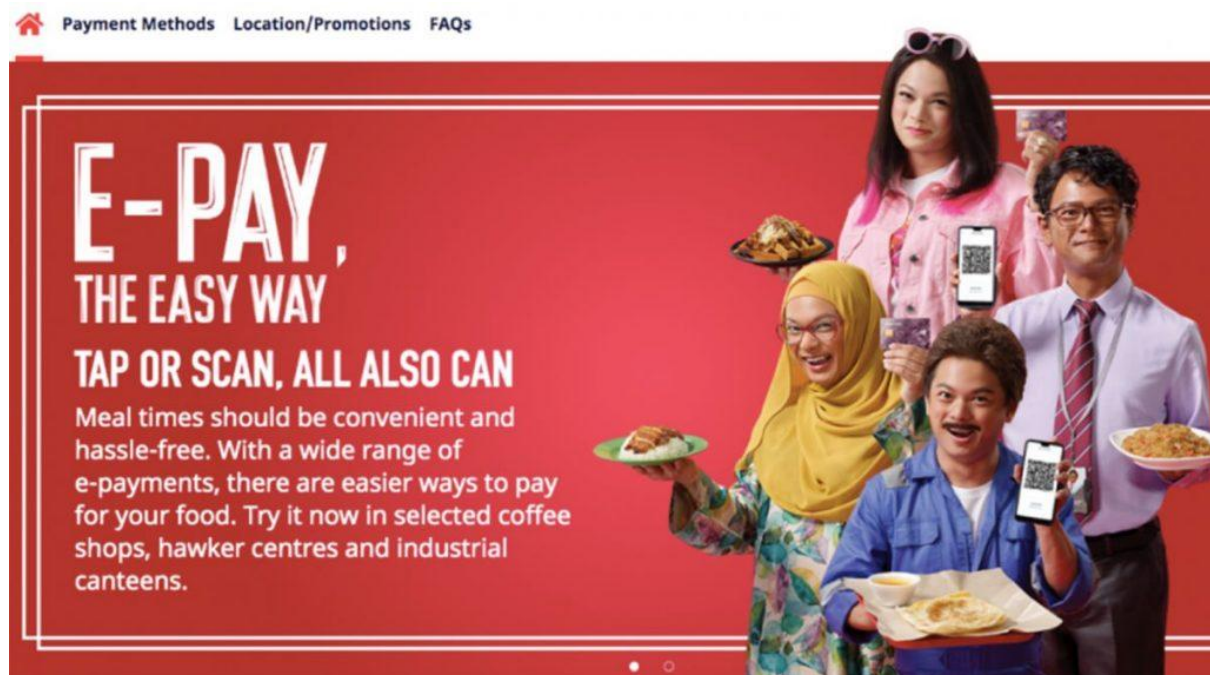
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<sup>1</sup> Term to refer to the use of informal Malay language.

self-loathing.” Twin comfort and discomfort — to roll words over my tongue; and twist language into something that unites, and at the same time, separates. To define experiences that defy vocabulary. As if the titular sentence is not meant to have a final clause, it is merely: Brown is.

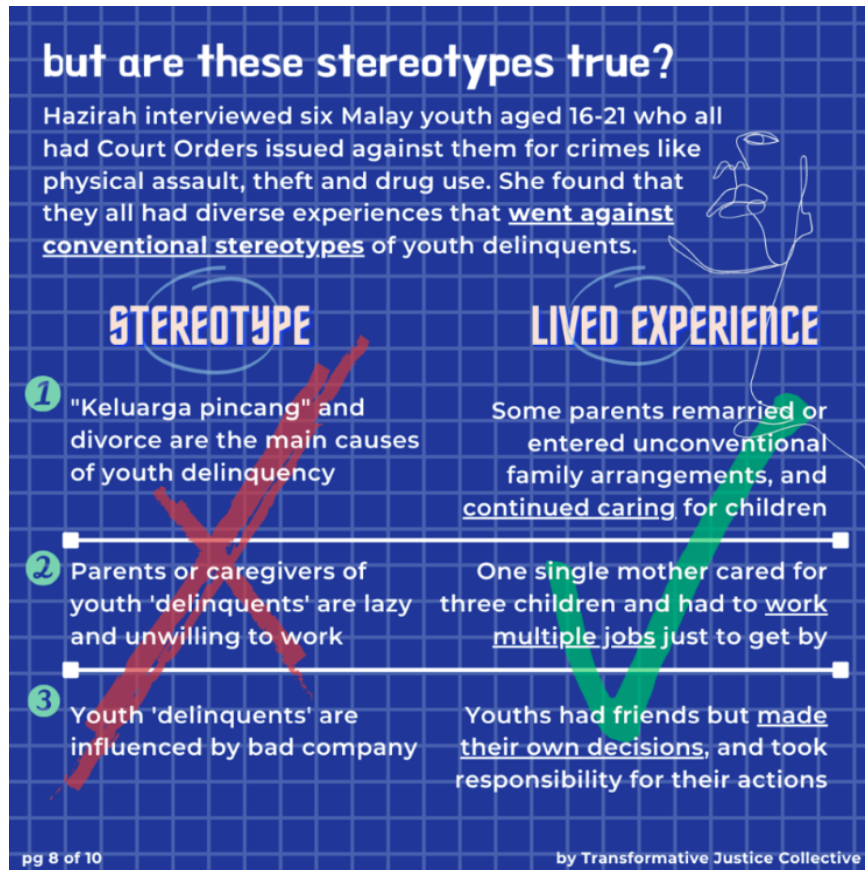
### ***What we see is what we accept***

Even as we celebrate the joy woven in our differences, hurtful, racist incidents inevitably threaten the threads that bind us. In 2019, a brownface advertisement of an e-payment website exposes how even media and advertising continue to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of minorities, by depicting them as caricatures.



*In 2019, Dennis Chew, a Chinese actor, dressed in brownface for an advertisement in an e-payment website. (Source: <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/nets-apologises-hurt-caused-e-payment-ad> )*

The cultural narrative of minorities in Singapore, entrenched in media, through newspapers and television shows, often depicts them with stereotypes that undermine the lived experiences of minorities. As analysed by Siti Hazirah Mohamad in the Transformative Justice Collective, television shows such as *Anak Metropolitan* and *Hanyut* which aired on Suria from 2002-2012, and 2005-2007 respectively, portrayed Malay youth as delinquents. Through such depiction, many viewers who watched these shows unconsciously accept the narrative that youth delinquency is a social issue that belongs to a specific racial group.



An extract from an infographic by the Transformative Justice Collective, based on the research of Siti Hazirah Mohamad on 'Contesting Media Representations of Malay Youth Delinquency in Singapore'. (<https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2021/06/06/contesting-media-representations-of-malay-youth-delinquency-in-singapore/>)

Even more recently, just last year, a Hari Raya advertisement intended to celebrate the festive period portrayed moments in the life of a family living in a rental flat, drawing backlash from some viewers, who asserted that it contained stereotypes about the Malay community, in particular, that families only deserved to celebrate if they attained socio-economic progress.



A scene from the 2022 Hari Raya advertisement, that was later taken down by MCI, due to its controversy (Source: <https://www.todayonline.com/minute/mci-removes-hari-raya-ad-after-online-backlash-stereotyping-malay-community-1888086>)

The media has power over our subconscious, influencing our attitudes and beliefs towards groups of people, and even ourselves. For minorities, they often amplify our own cultural anxieties, for it attributes such deficiencies as inherent to our community, in spite of the more nuanced factors that perhaps produce such circumstances. Yet, media should eminently be used as a positive social force, celebrating the joys of our communities; instead of painting our struggles as wholly ours to confront.

### ***Microaggressions are anything but 'Micro'***

Such incidents have made the headlines due to its controversial weight; but lesser known is the microaggressions that pervade our day-to-day — a patient's eyes brightening as they note to the minority doctor, "Nurse, can you call for the doctor?"; a stranger commenting that a person is 'hardworking' or 'pretty' with the unnecessary, additional clause, "for their race"; or a new colleague insisting that they shorten your name because "your name is hard to pronounce".

A recent Straits Times article shed light on the language we use to refer to such incidents, which are sometimes referred to as 'casual racism', connoting that it is accidental. But in truth, such incidents are far from accidental, and to dismiss these as casual, unintentional remarks downplays them as harmless and inoffensive. A more fitting term for such incidents

are microaggressions — described in the same article as “comments, questions or actions that cause discomfort or even hurt to someone, stemming from that person’s belonging to a marginalised group”.

Microaggressions appear in a multiplicity of forms, but can be subdivided into three categories of microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults are when a person makes a discriminatory joke, while purporting that they had done so unintentionally. Microinsults can be in the form of backhanded compliments — making a remark that appears positive, but implies negative qualities of someone’s race. Finally, a microinvalidation refers to an instance when someone undermines the lived experiences of a marginalised group, such as suggesting that “racism does not exist in our society”.

Microaggressions are entrenched in everyday conversations, and are often ignored, despite the fact that they communicate hostile insults towards others. In a recent poll by the National Youth Council (NYC), it was found that two-thirds of youths in Singapore have personally experienced or witnessed racial discrimination, including racial microaggressions.

On the receiving end, a minority person can do no more than brush aside the insensitive remark that was made, often questioning the severity of the situation, as to whether they were too sensitive towards the remark made. A minority person, when caught in such a circumstance, may lack the emotional capacity to respond in the heat of the moment — too hurt to call out the remark; or too scared of the backlash from the offender. Yet, the burden of educating people about microaggressions should not extend only onto minorities themselves, but to all people in our community.



Rachel Pang Comics



Comic artist Rachel Pang utilises her social media platform to raise awareness about social issues such as racism in Singapore. (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/rachelpangcomics/?hl=en>)

While microaggressions are hidden messages that may not appear overtly harmful, the fact that it is normalised every day, without notice, without realisation, without intervention, makes it a subtle poison that seeps into our fault lines.

Beyond the verbal microaggressions that are commonplace in everyday conversations, environmental microaggressions are an equally potent threat to our social fabric. It is likewise, a subtle discrimination that occurs within society, entrenching narratives, or cultures, in the very infrastructure surrounding us. This may manifest in classroom, or workplace settings that carry cues about what is considered to be the norm. For instance, in healthcare settings, where patients may not want to work with certain doctors or nurses, on the basis of their race, or even asking those who are visible minorities to show their qualifications because of the implicit assumption that they are unqualified.

On the whole, the experience of being a minority in Singapore often lends itself to discomfort, due to hidden biases — but as a community, we must recognise the poison laced in our words, and to speak up against what we know to be harmful.

### ***Celebrating race - a joy that is ours to reclaim***

There is joy to be found, even amidst this hurt. But that can only be felt when we make the effort to eliminate the microaggressions, harmful stereotypes and prejudices that inhibit us from truly reclaiming the joys of being in a multicultural society.

It means, speaking up, even if you are not of a minority background. Rather than remaining passive as a friend of yours makes someone else uncomfortable with a verbal microaggression, be brave enough to assert that it is wrong. A phenomena termed ‘calling in’, as opposed to ‘calling out’ such behaviours, can be helpful, when it comes to addressing the microaggressions that are done without harmful intent, but still cause harm — often by friends and loved ones. For instance, a friend who mentions that they are surprised that another classmate is “so good at Math for a Malay”, can be ‘called in’, by focusing on trying to mutually understand how to manage their biases. Reach out to the person who is on the receiving end of such microaggression; for the assurance that such behaviours are indeed insensitive, validates their struggles, instead of them having to swallow down the inevitable realities they are faced with.

Crucially, don’t be afraid to be told that you are wrong – be open enough to recognise that you can change. If you don’t understand a certain cultural practice, and are curious to learn more, ask respectfully — and you will learn so much; for such joy is meant to be shared after all. For some of us, our unconscious biases and stereotypes have been passed down through generations, but that does not hinder us from making the persistent effort to undo these biases, and to accept and respect others, not *in spite* of their differences, but *for* their differences in culture, tradition, and language.

More so, joy can only flourish when minority voices, and lived experiences are depicted accurately in media and literature. In international media, several groundbreaking television shows and films that embrace diversity, have picked up critical acclaim in Hollywood, such as the famed multiverse tale of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* that elicits empathy towards the struggles of Asian-Americans, or the coming-of-age *Ms Marvel*, a milestone for Pakistani-American representation. In our own shores, stories of minority experiences have been portrayed in books and anthologies like Alfian Saat's *Malay Sketches*, or Shailey Hingorani's *What We Inherit: Growing Up Indian*.

For years, our social fabric has been thinly veiled by the impression of racial tolerance, rather than genuine appreciation and celebration of our cultural differences. Racial harmony is characterised by fears of strife and division, with constant references to racial riots from our early years, that make us conscious of overtly expressing our biases. But true harmony must not be upheld under foundations of fear; and instead, it must be upheld under foundations of joy — and best of all, hope.

Hope to me, is not when we look past our differences, but when we recognise them, and celebrate them in all its bewildering, beautiful spectacle. For there is no language, or vocabulary to encapsulate these pure moments — they are ours to make; ours to preserve; and ours to love.

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