

The Borrowed Boy

By Alfian Sa'at

From "Hook & Eye: Stories from the Margins"

Note: These are reflection notes, done by Teacher Jo (www.teacher-jo.com). You will find that there's a distinct lack of opinion and not that much annotation. This is because this collection was put together with the intention that readers develop their own meaning based on their own life experiences.

How then should you use these notes to help yourself?

Reflect on and answer all the questions I have listed.

When attempting to answer these questions, be as open-minded and honest as possible. Where your opinion is needed, try to answer those questions in the PEEL format. Have evidence and reason, and elaborate as if trying to explain it to someone else who doesn't understand. Pretend to persuade someone else to accept your opinion.

Good luck!

Teacher Jo

Scene Summary	Analysis & Reflection
<p>The story begins with a descriptive that explains this culture of “borrowing” an orphan for Hari Raya, as an act of charity. The child will be treated one of the family, although, with a few extra kindnesses here and there out of sympathy.</p> <p>The narrative then switches, and we are introduced to Junaidah, the woman who requested to borrow a boy. The next few paragraphs are spent explaining the rationale behind her choice of colour scheme when purchasing the baju kurungs for both her son and the borrowed boy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the title is “The Borrowed Boy”, to entire story is written from the perspective of Junaidah. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We don’t get to know very much about Mydeen. He doesn’t even say anything of significance throughout the text except “Bye bye!” and “Selamat Hari Raya!” He could be any child and it wouldn’t make a difference. ○ This title matters. It carries the guilt that Junaidah feels at the end of the text – the sense that all she has done is to use a child. There is no real charity, not when her intentions were not 100% wholesome. ○ She had borrowed a boy to make herself feel better. • The descriptive is written with a subtly critical tone. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Diction: the use of the word “borrow” to describe the act of bringing an orphan along to enjoy in the festivities. We borrow things to use. So, they aren’t performing a sacrificial act of charity out of kindness, they were borrowing the child to use. Likewise, the use of the term “checked out”, a term commonly used with things rather than persons. ○ Irony: when describing the choice of colour for the child’s baju kurung, it is established that whether the child likes the outfit or not is unimportant. The point is for the colour to be the same as the rest of the family’s so that he feels like he’s a part of the family. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is ironic that they would want to make the borrowed child feel a part of the family but would not even consider respecting his wishes. Anyone part of the family would have their opinions considered.

- This suggests that a lot of the actions, just like the entire act of “charity” is just for show – superficial and insincere.

- **Characterisation:** Junaidah is arrogant.

- She possesses a sense of pride about her choice of colours as a reflection of her socio-economic status, as compared to poorer families who had no style and preferred bright, intense, garish colours.
- When her husband disputed her choice of colours, she pointed out that they had a car and therefore would not need their children to dress for high-visibility. → She’s quite snobbish and uses her privileged position to justify her decisions.
- Later, when she arrives at her mother-in-law’s, she critiques the paint and decorations as being hideous → an attempt again at priding herself on her sense of taste.

- **Characterisation:** Junaidah is quite practical.

- They might be financially-comfortable but it doesn’t mean that money should be spent willy-nilly. And so, after that statement about the privilege of not needing to dress in garish colours because they have a car, she asks the shopkeeper for a discount.
- We also see this practicality when she requested for an 8 year old boy from the orphanage. She had the foresight to realise that Haikel might be uncomfortable with a female companion, and it was just easier picking out a new outfit for someone about the same size as Haikel.

On the day of the big event, she struggles with both her son and husband – their attitudes frustrate her. As she gets more and more irritated by her son's behaviour, she catches herself being unreasonably protective of the borrowed boy.

- **Feelings:** Junaidah feels insignificant in her family.
 - In her opinion, her husband does not play his role as father, properly. Rather, he leaves all the important things to her to sort out and she feels unsupported. She also feels like he thinks her emotions are unimportant.
 - Her son has learnt to disregard her, especially if recognises that she doesn't have support from his father.
 - It might explain her snobbishness – she holds on desperately to anything about herself that she can feel good about, like her sense of fashion, her taste in colours, her socio-economic status, etc.
 - It might also explain why she wanted another child – someone so vulnerable and dependent on her, someone on her side. It also explains why she gets so protective of Mydeen – he is her charity, her project.
 - So much so that she can't even make the effort to explain what an orphan is to Haikel. If this is suppose to be their act of charity, Haikel would have to understand for it to be sincere.
- **Characterisation:** For all that Junaidah can be practical, she can be quite irrational as well.
 - The two outfits are of the same size – it really wouldn't have mattered if Haikel wanted the blue or the orange. However, she got angry (**feelings**) when Haikel insisted on the orange and her husband pointed out that it really wouldn't make a difference. This is irrational of her.
 - Nevertheless, this irrationality of hers stemmed from her feelings of insignificance. Again, this is her project, she had planned how it should turn

	<p>out. That her husband and son were getting in the way of her plans was frustrating. She just wants this one thing to go her way and even that is too much to ask for.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Eventually, she catches herself again, and decides to give in. She recognises that Haikel was reacting to the arrival of another child. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider mothers and housewives → how does society view them? Do we take their role seriously? How do we perceive them versus a working parent? Do we see them as different, and do we therefore treat them each differently? • If Junaidah is a reflection of housewives/househusbands in Singapore, what do we understand of how they feel?
<p>They arrive at the orphanage, and she gets out of the car to pick him up. She is anxious and somewhat uncomfortable. The orphanage is less than homely. As she waits for the receptionist to bring the chosen boy out, she reflects on the advertisement that prompted her to perform this act of charity in the first place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junaidah's feelings of insignificance results in her feeling expectant when she arrives at the orphanage. She hopes that the boy would choose her and stick with her, no one else. • Characterisation: Junaidah is self-conscious. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ She worries about how others might view her, for e.g. the receptionist at the orphanage. ○ It might also explain why she's so particular about having a good taste of colour and clothes. She doesn't like to be criticised or thought poorly of. (This also shows how <u>hypocritical</u> her behaviour is, given how she frequently criticises others.)

- Later on, when Mydeen goes missing, she freaks out at the thought of what “they” might think. Except, there is no “they” to judge her – Mydeen has no parents.
- She also worries about how she might disappoint the other children at the orphanage – not that their feelings should matter to her since she isn’t doing anything wrong.
- As she comforts herself, knowing that it isn’t really her fault if any child feels rejected for not having been chosen, she tries to convince herself that she will do what is right instead of playing pretend.
- **Characterisation:** Junaidah is prone to impulsiveness.
 - She admits this herself (“Junaidah had to admit that she had not always been so circumstpect.”)
 - Her decision to borrow an orphan for Hari Raya was done on impulse; she was swayed by an intentionally manipulative advertisement.
 - Likewise, the decision to have him stay the night, and the consideration that she might keep him for a week.
 - It also explains why she has to keep reminding herself that he is not her son.
- The author’s **tone** becomes critical again when describing the Junaidah’s **ironic** response: “When she put down the phone she was flushed with that superior happiness that comes about from making other people happy.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The choice to use the word “superior” (<i>diction</i>) to describe how happy she feels has two meanings. If happiness could be measured against a scale, the happiness she felt was superior to other forms of happiness. ○ It could also mean that she felt a superior happiness from being so wonderful, and that in turn hints at her superiority. It is uncommon to describe happiness in this way, so this latter meaning is more likely. ○ The irony lies in the fact that when we make other happy, the focus should be on others and our own happiness does not matter. <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why do you think Junaidah is so self-conscious? ● Why does Junaidah have to convince herself that she will be a good host instead of playing pretend? ● When you perform acts of charity or kindness, why do you do so? Is it for them or do you do it to feel good about yourself as well? ● What do you think was Alfian Sa’at’s intention in describing Junaidah’s response with such a critical tone?
<p>Mydeen is brought out and introduced to Junaidah. He is shy but seems to know how to behave. They first arrive at her mother-in-law’s place. Once again, Junaidah feels a sense of protectiveness over Mydeen and concern that he might be marginalised.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mydeen’s first significant action occurs when he suddenly reaches out and slips his hand into Junaidah’s. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He might have been taught that this was the right way to behave from his past experiences as a borrowed boy. This is “good boy” behaviour. He might even have been manipulated into believing that this is how he might get adopted. However, we never find that out, just as we never really find out

Mydeen's presence seems to evoke a competitiveness in Haikel, her son. She ponders about the effect Mydeen may have on Haikel and contemplates even keeping Mydeen around for longer.

anything about Mydeen besides insignificant things like the way he looks, how handsome he'll probably be in his later years, the spelling of his name, and that he is great at badminton.

- Nevertheless, the gesture shocks Junaidah (**feelings**).
- She tries to think rationally about why he might have done so. She has to put in effort to convince herself that every action is meaningless and not so insignificant. Why?
- Junaidah **feels** protective over Mydeen. She is worried that he might be discriminated and would not be included by the other children. As it was, Haikel refused to be welcoming to Mydeen.
- Junaidah's **irrational** side appears again – when it is pointed out that she is behaving badly, she justifies by insisting that “they” will criticise. Except there is no “they”. Mydeen has a void in his life but he isn't a void in someone else's life.
 - Her irrationality and emotions go out of control and she thinks “the boy who had held Junaidah's hand would forever be beyond her reach”. He just held her hands, for goodness sakes.

Reflect:

- Why does the seemingly intimate gesture shock Junaidah? What does it tell you about her? Can you link her response to everything we know about her thus far?
 - It is as if Junaidah sees herself in Mydeen.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ She is lonely, unsupported, insignificant and marginalised. She probably sees the same of the orphans, of Mydeen. However, at this point, it doesn't seem like she's recognised this motivation behind her actions yet. ● She is slightly assured when Mydeen seemed to show signs of opening up – she would not have to watch out for him (a very stressful and exhausting part of motherhood, and another one of her many stressors). <p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you agree that Junaidah's protectiveness of Mydeen stems from her seeing a part of herself in him? Why or why not? (You don't have to agree, but you should know how to explain your perspective clearly and convincingly.)
<p>The narrative takes a momentary detour as the customs and traditions associated with Hari Raya is explained and explored.</p>	<p><u>Reflect:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you think of your race's/religion's rituals and traditions? Especially those that involve families and friends gathering together. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Are they significant to you? ○ What do you like and dislike about them? ○ How do people normally behave during such occasions? ○ Do certain persons get marginalised during such events? Why?
<p>It is lunchtime, and the children are called out to wash their hands. That is when Junaidah realises that Mydeen was missing. Upon</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When Junaidah finds out that Mydeen was not allowed to play with the rest of the children because he isn't their friend, Junaidah shakes Haikel in anger and demands: "Do you know whose baju kurung you're wearing?"

questioning Haikel, she realised that Mydeen was marginalised by the other children and might be why he had left. She scolds Haikel until he cries. They leave the house to look for him and eventually finds him with another family. Coincidentally, it's the same family which borrowed Mydeen for Hari Raya the year before.

- This is a very strange question. He is wearing his baju kurung. It was established early in the morning that it wouldn't matter who wore which baju kurung. However, to Junaidah, Haikel is wearing Mydeen's baju kurung.
- It is **ironic** that she is being such an unreasonable mother to her real son over a boy who is hers for only a day.
 - She might think her family is not on her side but the reality is that she isn't on theirs either.
 - Even her husband whom she perceives as uncaring is annoyed and defends the boy.
- Her fear of being judged is triggered because this orphan who must have a void (being an orphan) has decided to walk out on them anyway. **Characterisation:** She is emotionally immature.
 - Maybe he walked out because he recognised the area and wanted to look for his previous "friends". Maybe he walked out because he was bored. Maybe he just likes lift buttons. She doesn't know but jumps to conclusions anyway.
 - She **feels** rejected by her family; is she projecting that on Mydeen too? Does she think Mydeen has rejected her too?
 - Immediately upon seeing the family Mydeen was with, she immediately notices all their flaws – messy hair, lipstick on someone too young, not wearing a tudung, reeking of cigarettes. She dislikes so much about them yet, Mydeen chose them. Except he didn't, but that is how she perceives it.
 - She is so jealous (**feelings**) that she even thinks they are luckier than she is.

	<p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If we agree that Junaidah sees Mydeen as her special project, as belonging to her, how do you think she feels when she realises that he is missing and that the other kids marginalised him? Why would she feel that way? • What does the fact that no one realised Mydeen was missing indicate about how they view him? • The fact that Junaidah's husband, whom she perceives as uninvolved in their son's upbringing, defends Haikel – what does that tell you about Junaidah's perceptions? • Junaidah is an adult, a wife, a mum, and yet she is so emotionally immature. How does this make you feel? What do you understand from this, as a reflection of the real world.
<p>Everyone fusses over Mydeen upon their return. After, they went over to her mother's place and everyone doted upon him as well. He became the centre of attention and nobody ignored him after.</p> <p>It was decided that they would let him stay an additional night. Haikel seemed to like having Mydeen around.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junaidah is not entirely happy with Mydeen being at the centre of attention. She had thought it would be better if he remained a wallflower. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This is strange and <i>ironic</i>. If the purpose of this borrow-a-child programme is to give these children a taste of a family event, would it not make sense to have the child enjoy all the attention he can have? Why be a wallflower, marginalised? Does the child not already get enough of that? ○ Furthermore, she was very upset and protective, worried that he might be discriminated by the other children. When Haikel told her that they didn't let Mydeen play with them, she was so upset. Now that he has everyone else's attention, she does not agree with it.

- Later, when she allows herself to picture the scene as she had seen it in the advertisement, one might think that she would be happy – she has achieved the purpose being this borrow-a-child programme.
 - Yet, she snaps herself out of it, reminding herself that he is just on loan.
- **Diction:** the use of the word “Dream” to describe the experience – what’s slightly unclear is if it is a dream for Mydeen (is it, though?) or for her? If it is mostly for her, what is the dream?
 - She spends the first half of the day over-protective, wanting him to like her and stick with her. The next half of the day, she is unhappy that the family has welcomed him. Is she, perhaps, unhappy that he isn’t sticking with her? That he has chosen another family over hers?
- Yet, Mydeen is innocent in all this. Her mother-in-law’s statement is poignant: “You’ve done no wrong, child. We just met you.”
 - Nevertheless, Junaidah wants to believe that he would forget her, if not for the money and the baju kurung. She is trying to believe all sorts of unfair things about him.

Reflect:

- Why would Junaidah want Mydeen to be a wallflower?
- What is Mydeen to Junaidah? (Note: “what” not “who”)
- What is strange that she has to snap herself out of this “Dream”? Wasn’t the point to give an orphan a semblance of family even if just for one day? Well, he’s being treated as part of the family. So, what is wrong?

Junaidah reflects on the day's events, and Mydeen's role in their lives. She also wonders if they have a role in his life. She is overwhelmed by guilt and wants to seek his forgiveness but does not know what to ask forgiveness for.

- They decide not to return him to the orphanage until the day after. Why, though, is unclear. Perhaps it is because it was late, perhaps it was because Haikel seemed to have taken a liking to Mydeen and so they wanted to give the boys a bit more time together.
- Calmer now (**mood**), Junaidah reflects on the day's events.
 - Although she already understands it, the **symbolism** behind the Hari Raya celebrates becomes more meaningful to her → she goes to Mydeen's feet to ask for forgiveness.

Reflect:

- As she reflects, Junaidah asks herself three questions. Answer them, as if she were a friend and she's been confiding in you. What would you tell her?
 - What if Haikel and Mydeen spent more time together?
 - What was his place in their lives, and their place in his?
 - And what if he ran away from them again?
- Is there any value to her questions?
- Upon reflecting, what has Junaidah learnt/realised?
- What do you think Junaidah wanted to seek forgiveness from Mydeen for?

Reflect:

- Are you guilty of using people, even if that wasn't the obvious intention? Think back to a time when you might have manipulated or used someone else to achieve something or to fill a void. How does it make you feel to remember this event?

- Although the story is called “The Borrowed Boy”, the focus isn’t actually on Mydeen. He is merely a prop. Junaidah is the main character and she is the one who has been marginalised. In what way has Junaidah been marginalised and how does it make her feel? How does she respond to being marginalised?
- How hypocritical are you? When you criticise people, why do you do it? Is it to cover up for some flaw that you possess?
- Having learnt something from this story, how would you proceed with the rest of your life? Are you going to change anything about yourself or the way you have lived? If yes, why?