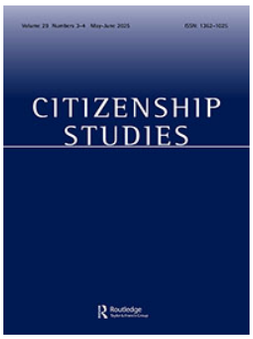

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# Return of liminality: Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants from Australia

Khairudin Aljunied

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# Return of liminality: Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants from Australia

Khairudin Aljunied[1,2]

[1]Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore; [2]Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, IIUM (ISTAC-IIUM)

**ABSTRACT**

For more than four decades, scholars have explained the reasons for return migration through a matrix of failure, conservatism, retirement, and innovation. Recent reconceptualizations have added achievement, completion, setback, and crisis as other situations that compelled migrants to return home. Using Singapore Malay Muslims from Australia as our case study, this article develops the argument that an additional situation should be considered in future studies of return migration. I term it 'return of liminality'. Return to liminality points to the uncertainties that defined the migrant experience in the host countries, which prompted them to depart back with lingering feelings of being out of place, of being in between, and betwixt societies of their home countries.

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Scholars of return migration have identified several determinants that could explain why migrants returned to their home countries after sojourning for some years overseas. Most influential was the work of F. P. Cerase, who developed a typology that outlines four key reasons for return migration: failure, conservatism, retirement, and innovation (Cerase 1974). Highly debated and refined, Cerase's typology has inspired fresh formulations, the most recent and compelling for this article is developed by a noted scholar of Filipino migrants, Graziano Battistella.[1] Battistella faults past studies for subscribing to the idea that return migration could be explained primarily within the matrix that Cerase and his followers have developed and expanded. Such a line of thought, according to Battistella, fails to register the complex range of choices and factors that may have encouraged or deterred return migration (Battistella 2018). As an alternative, Battistella offers a new conceptual framework that places 'the main types of return on a continuum utilizing two variables: the time for return (at the end or before the end of the migration project) and the decision to return (voluntary and involuntary) (Battistella 2018)'. The four general situations of return migration are:

> Return of achievement: the migrant returns voluntarily at the end of the migration project (or contract) having achieved the purpose for which he or she went abroad.

**CONTACT** Khairudin Aljunied ak1679@georgetown.edu

> Return of completion: the migrant returns after completing the contract, but it is not a voluntary return, because the migrant would like to stay abroad for another period or to go abroad again; however, it is not possible.
>
> Return of setback: the migrant returns voluntarily but before the end of the migration process, for various reasons, including unhappiness at working conditions, family reasons, experience of abuse, or trafficking. It is a setback from the perspective of the original migration project.
>
> Return of crisis (forced return): caused by situations like political upheaval or environmental disaster. It is an involuntary return: the migrant is forced to leave for reasons of security or political decisions made by the country of origin or destination. This scenario can also include the repatriation of irregular migrants. (Battistella 2018)

This article draws upon and extends Battistella's four general situations of return migration. Based on in-depth interviews with Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants from Australia, I argue that an additional situation should be considered in future studies of return migration. I term it as 'return of liminality'. By this, I mean, first of all, that these migrants entered into their host countries not as refugees, displaced persons, and asylum seekers but as relatively literate, educated, and skilled migrants who arrived with plans of staying permanently but were either inadequately prepared or were confronted with unfavorable circumstances that prompted them to leave eventually. Much work has been done recently (*pace* the concept of liminality introduced by Victor Turner) on the liminal lives and subjectivities of migrants, of being 'betwixt and between' the host countries that they are in (Kirk, Bal, and Renee Janssen 2017; Paynter 2018; Gold 2019). This article draws on such studies and goes much further.

The return of liminality also points to lingering uncertainties, which return migrants face to stay in their home countries. Stunted midway in the path of achieving their migration aims, be it in the realm of employment, education, or social life, these migrants hoped to retrace their steps back to their host countries. But their hopes are dashed by personal, familial, legal, and material constraints and obligations. Accordingly, the return of liminality is a thorny process of wanting to be a constituent part of a temporal context but never quite reaching that goal. It is also a state of being that is beset with a constant longing to return to a dream destination, and at the same time, a tormented experience of having to stay and develop a new sense of belonging to their country of origin. It is a psychological condition that generates emotional and existential crises. The return of liminality becomes protracted when migrants lack the means to be mobile and transnational that would enable them to have 'regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders' (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999) Caught in between conflicting identities and fractured hopes, these migrants remained in such a condition for some years being neither high-achievers in their home countries nor contented about life there.

The return of liminality affects Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants, the subjects of this article, regardless of how many years they have spent as part of the diasporic community in Australia. Russell King's observation that 'an optimum length of absence might be found whereby the absence is sufficiently long to have influenced the migrant and allowed him to absorb certain experiences and values, and yet sufficiently short that he still has time and energy upon return to utilise his newly acquired skills and attitudes' is

somewhat not applicable to Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants (King 1984). Even if the skills and attitudes they have acquired are useful and somewhat transferable in the Singaporean context, they are still affected and stifled by the radical change of lifestyles and societal norms.

This article proceeds as follows. I begin with a discussion on the migration of Singapore Malay-Muslims from the 1990s onwards, examining the various factors that prompted such movement of people and the challenges these migrants faced as they sought to assimilate themselves within Australian society. Their identities as Malay-Muslims, inability to secure stable employment, familial problems, and also legal obligations with the countries of origin are among the main issues that planted the seeds of the return of liminality. These migrants began to develop concerns and even doubts about residing in Australia. Returning home was inescapable. In the second section, I show how this state of liminality barely dissipated with returning migration. Rather, feelings and bouts of loneliness, loss, reverse culture shock, nostalgia, and the dearth of employment choices characterized the lives of Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants. Their liminal state, straddling between their unachieved ambitions in Australia and the painful realities of life in Singapore are explained in this section.

## Data and methodology

A note on data and methodology. While much attention has usually been placed on Singaporean migration to Australia and the processes of acculturation, no study has been done on Singapore Muslim migrants who returned to and resettled back in Singapore (Ho Lynn 2014). This article fills a gap in the literature. I conducted lengthy interviews stretching from 2 to 3 hours with five Singapore Malay-Muslims (four males and one female) below the age of 40. Hailing from lower-middle-class backgrounds before their migration, all five lived in Melbourne and Sydney, Australia, for 6 years or more. The names provided in this paper are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of the interviewees. The period of stay in Australia is as follows: Bob (1993–2008), Awie (1999–2018), Habsah (2005–2018), Syed (2008–2014), and Nasir (2009–2015).[2] They are the first generation Singaporean migrants to Australia and, by the time of the interview, are already young parents with children below the age of 10. All of them were in their teens when they moved to Australia between 1993 and 2009. Collectively, they returned to Singapore between 2008 and 2018. They are still residing in Singapore. More importantly, they form part of a larger study on over 100 Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants I interviewed in three cities in Australia: Melbourne, Brisbane, and Sydney.[3]

Only a tiny fraction of these interviewees returned to Singapore. While this number may seem insignificant at first glance, numbering no more than five people, their narratives are illuminating and reveal some variations in how they cope with the liminality of returning to Singapore. I find that their accounts are instrumental in challenging existing theories of return migration. Studies conducted by Chan and Chan (2012), Yee Koh (2015), Nordmark and Colliander (2023) demonstrate how a small sample size of five respondents or fewer can be used to refine perspectives on migration in the Global South further. While these studies, including mine, acknowledge that small sizes are an essential limitation, I triangulate the narratives of Singapore Malay-Muslims with studies of similar cases and experiences of return migrants

elsewhere. More crucially, this is the first-ever study of these Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants, and I hope to inspire more research in this area to expand the sample size to test the return to liminality theory that I offer.

In this article, I seek to understand why this small fragment among over a hundred I had interviewed chose to return to Singapore, given the many opportunities and lifestyles that Australia has to offer to most Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants. Departing slightly from Bimal Ghosh's (2000) assertion that return migration 'is largely influenced by the initial motivations for migration as well as by the duration of the stay abroad and particularly by the conditions under which the return takes place', I found that the duration of stay in Australia was not a decisive factor for the return migration of Singapore Malay-Muslims, even though changes in motivations and conditions in the host country and demands of the home country were crucial reasons. All respondents returned voluntarily. However, the extent to which they were willing to return to Singapore differs.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the National University of Singapore Institutional Review Board (NUS-IRB), Ref No. S-19–282. I obtained verbal consent from the respondents to participate in this study.

## Singapore Malay-Muslims migration to Australia and decisions to return

With a largely working-class minority in Singapore making up less than 14% of the population, Singapore Malay-Muslims have migrated to Australia in large numbers since the late 1980s in search of better opportunities for work, education, and lifestyle. Most settled in the state of Victoria in the suburbs of greater Melbourne and Perth, Western Australia. Although the details of migration varied with each individual and the circumstances surrounding their families, it is clear that at the point of migration, Australia represented an opportunity for a brighter future for these migrants and their families. In 1994, Sullivan and Gunasekaran reported that:

> . . . the promise of a better standard of living as the result of more affordable housing and private transportation, foremost among the relative attractions of Australia for migrants from Singapore are reunification with family members who had migrated previously, educational opportunities for their children and themselves, greater political freedom, and more leisure time. (Sullivan and Gunasekaran 1994)

As of 2016, there are at least 3,753 Singapore Malay-Muslims settled in Australia.[4] According to Awie, his family first visited Melbourne as early as 1987. During the visit, his father linked up with his ex-colleagues from Singapore and was keen on living there. He saw the prospect of a better life in Australia and the opportunity to raise his children there in a more conducive environment. Syed, in turn, said, 'My mum wanted me to have a brighter future, because she saw how stressed I was when I was in Singapore in terms of education. So she decided to take a leap of faith and sent me to Melbourne to live with my aunt and uncle'.

Support in settling in, such as readily available accommodation provided by relatives who have migrated to Australia, was also cited as an important factor for migration. Four interviewees already had family or relatives living in Australia before migrating. As Syed explains, 'The pull factor was not only education but the fact that we had family members

in Melbourne … My aunt and uncle had been there for about ten years before I came over'. The interviewees lived as part of the larger Singaporean Malay communities in Melbourne, concentrated mostly in the western and southeastern suburbs of greater Melbourne. These Malay communities are close-knit and attend communal gatherings that include weekly religious classes, annual *Mawlids* (celebration of the Prophet's birthday), as well as *Ramadhan* and *Eid* celebrations. In recent times, concerted efforts have been made by the communities to maintain and impart Malay culture to the younger generation. The communal feeling among Malays in Australia is arguably strong, with the younger generation even having their own social media account (Omar 2008). Among the interviewees, Bob was the only exception to this trend. While Bob's mother is a Malay-Singaporean, his father is a white Australian. Some years after his parents separated, Bob moved to Australia in 1993 to live with his father on a farm, 4 hours away from the city. He recalls, 'The population of the town was very spaced out. My nearest neighbour was 500 metres away … There were only 28 students in my entire school. I was the only Asian-looking and brown-skinned kid there'.

Even though Australian society is vastly different from Singapore, many respondents proved adaptable and resilient in adapting to a new environment and society. Apart from socializing with other Singaporean Muslim children who attended the communal gatherings mentioned earlier, the interviewees describe forging close friendships with children from other religious and ethnic backgrounds. Those who attended public schools describe close friendships with white Australians, while those who attended Islamic schools describe close friendships with Australian Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds, attesting to the largely inclusive nature of Australian multiculturalism as long as migrants can adapt effectively to society (Roose and Harris 2015).

Such 'cosmopolitan adaptation' among Singapore Malay-Muslims in Australia is a topic that has been explored elsewhere by Aljunied et al. (2021). To be sure, being exposed to individuals from different backgrounds and the idea of multiculturalism in Australia had lasting effects on the interviewees. Generally, it is often viewed with positive sentiment and often cited as one of the things they missed most about Australia. For Bob, this awareness had developed into a sense of appreciation for the differences in cultural and religious practices among Muslims that despite these differences they were bound by their common faith as a larger family:

> I recently created a podcast using my ability to talk with people around the world. It's called the Big Muslim Family podcast. The premise of it is that I talk to Muslims from around the world and then we have a discussion on what's it like to be a Muslim living in that part of the world – where do you get *halal* food, how do you celebrate your *Eid* and *Ramadhan*, and other issues. I also talk to reverts to Islam, about their journey back [to Islam], and how was it for them, and the signs that they had … So that's something that I've been working on for the last couple of months.

Exposure to the same cosmopolitan society in Australia, however, had prompted Awie to find comfort in raising his children in the familiarity of Singapore's Muslim society. He explains:

> There is no shortage of Islamic classes in Australia … Islamic education in Melbourne is varied … Because you have the various *madhhabs* (schools of thoughts) while in Singapore we are mainly *Shafi'is*. My wife and I feel that we need that concrete foundation for our

> children in one *madhhab*. We understand that all other schools of thoughts are valid but we want them to focus on one. Additionally, in Australia, on top of the different *madhhabs*, you have the different [ethnic] cultures of those people depending on where they come from . . . The religious education in Singapore is more aligned with the values with which we were brought up with.

Migrant theorists have argued that the strength of integration and transnationalism among migrants structure their decision to return to their home countries. Migrants with strong integration in the host country and weak transnational ties are most likely to stay. Migrants with weak integration in the host country and strong transnational connections are most likely to plan for return migration (Carling and Bivand Erdal 2014). My interviewees provide a different trajectory. They were smoothly integrated into the host country and, at the same time, strong transnational ties and obligations which characterize most globalized youths in Australia (Kamaludeen 2016). At the same time, they were unprepared, be it psychologically or emotionally, to accept the reality that, as migrants, there is always a looming possibility of returning to their land of origin. This had placed them in a state of liminality where the pulls from both ends placed them in a position of a rock and a hard place, having to choose between two places they regarded as home. In the end, and due to circumstances not within their control, all five made the difficult decision to return to their home countries.

It should be mentioned here that one of the reasons why Singapore Malay-Muslims had to return home was the inability to secure permanent residency in Australia. Without permanent residency, many migrant families in Australia find themselves in limbo as their choices for employment are often limited. In addition, it also adds financial strain as they do not get to enjoy subsidies in education and healthcare (Baas 2006). Nasir and his family, for example, decided to return to Singapore after attempts to secure permanent residency in Australia after 7 years failed, meaning that living in Australia as foreigners no longer became sustainable.

> We were waiting for PR status since we arrived . . . So we were considered foreigners and being charged fees as a foreigner is super expensive; and we did not receive any kind of financial benefits to ease our financial difficulties . . . My father was the sole breadwinner, and usually by the end of the month the financial situation was really tight.

One other primary reason why young men returned to Singapore is to serve their National Service for 2 years. For most of them, this return is expected, especially if they have yet to renounce their Singapore citizenship in favour of becoming Australian citizens. Yet, when asked if they had looked forward to serving their National Service in Singapore, all of them stated that they would have likely continued living in Australia if the choice of serving National Service was up to the individual. Singapore's strict policy against defaulters is another reason why returning home was unavoidable.[5]

Under Singapore law, Singaporean males above 13 years staying overseas for an extended period must provide at least $75,000 as security or bond. It is stated on the Central Manpower Base (CMPB) website:

> Under the Enlistment Act (Chapter 93), all male Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents aged 13 years and above are required to comply with the Exit Permit requirements. Exit Permit requirements are necessary to ensure that National Service (NS)-liable

> males who reside overseas at a young age or have gone overseas to study will return to Singapore to fulfil their NS responsibilities.[6]

Syed shared how this became the deciding factor for him to return and serve his National Service:

> At that point in time I had a place in an Australian university. I realized that I had to choose between deferring my National Service and foregoing the bond or to come back and complete my National Service then go back to Australia. Fortunately, they could hold that place in the university for me for up to two years.

For those who had not renounced their Singaporean citizenship, the choice is less straightforward, as Bob explains:

> Obviously, I had to do my National Service, right? I could go back to Australia and hide out for a few years but if I leave, if I run away, then I run the risk of getting arrested if I ever return to Singapore . . . So I decided to do serve my National Service.

Even for someone who had been granted Australian citizenship, the risk of being unable to return to Singapore anytime, and the idea of having to sever ties with one's place of birth permanently is inconceivable. The choice to serve National Service or to run away from it presents Singaporean Muslims in Australia with a unique if problematic paradox – that they can remain free overseas, but they are no longer free to return to Singapore.

If we accept the argument that return migration is borne out of a complex set of factors, from forced or voluntary, the case of Awie and his wife illustrates that migrant decisions to return cannot always be dichotomized as such (King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011; King and Christou 2014; Kibria, Bowman, and O'Leary 2014; Jain 2013). Both forced and voluntary factors played crucial roles in compelling migrants to leave their host countries as their states of liminality became unbearable and unsustainable. Awie had met his wife when she was studying in Australia. After marriage, the two of them lived in Australia.

> Especially after having children, we flew back more often . . . My wife would stay in Singapore for a few months while I returned to Australia . . . That kind of routine went on for quite a while . . . We felt that being away from each other was not healthy for our family unit; so we had to decide – are we going to stay in Australia or are we going to go back to Singapore? Either way, we had to stick as a family.

Brigitte Waldorf (1995) argues that migrants 'who are satisfied with their jobs and residences have significantly and substantially lower return intention probabilities than migrants who are dissatisfied with their jobs and or residences'. The case of Awie contradicts this point. He had a good-paying job in Australia, and his family was already living in a neighbourhood they felt very attached to. Awie made the painful decision to return to Singapore due to kinship factors that trumped the material success he gained from living in Australia. To be sure, the decision for them to return to Singapore was made both imperative and urgent because of his mother-in-law's deteriorating health.

He explains,

> For my in-laws, the only grandchildren they had were ours, and for my children, the only grandparents they had were my in-laws. It was a good decision because my in-laws were

> getting older and my children were growing up … We saw the value in building the relationship between my children and their grandparents.

Returning permanently, however, meant more serious long-term preparations. Having stayed in Australia since the age of 11, Habsah returned to Singapore to get married 13 years later. Knowing that she was resettling in Singapore, she had to decide what to do with the possessions that she had accumulated over a decade of living in Australia:

> When I was packing my things up it was very difficult … I did a lot of spring cleaning before I left … I left behind only my winter clothes … Other than that, I took everything back with me. I'm not the kind of person who can just leave my things there for my parents to clean up … Thankfully that year my cousins came to visit us in Australia, so I made use of all their excess baggage space to bring back my things to Singapore.

Returning was not something these Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants hoped for. Hence, the process of fitting themselves back into the home society was by no means easy and filled with liminalities. Indeed, life upon returning to Singapore oscillated between reliance, independence, isolation, and regrets over the entire migration journey.

## Forms of liminality

Malay-Muslims that I interviewed experienced three kinds of liminalities upon their return to Singapore. The first kind of liminality involves reverse culture shock. The second pertains to psychological adjustment, and the third is pragmatic employment. It can be said that these liminalities form part of the reacculturation process a migrant has to undergo after having been outside the country for some time (Sussman 2000; Onwumechili et al. 2003). My five interviewees manifest these various liminalities in their unique ways.

- *Reverse Culture Shock*

To begin with reverse culture shock, the interviewees oscillate between feeling and being Singaporean and Australian. Their memories of growing up in Singapore and the connections that they made before they migrated to Australia helped them settle in quickly. And yet, having spent a large part of their life in Australia, they see themselves as Australian as well. This distinction can be seen most apparently through their cultural values. Among the Australian cultural values most often cited by interviewees are the warmth and friendliness shown to strangers, often through making small talks such as asking someone, 'Hey, how [are] you doing?' In contrast, Bob mulls, in Singapore, 'when you ask someone how [are] you doing? they look at you suspiciously, like, what do you want from me?' Such differences create a sense of longing among returning migrants for Australia.

Return migrants I spoke to also missed the Australian lifestyle of being more relaxed or open around others. Awie, for example, explains:

> When I'm in Singapore, I bring with me the Aussie traits of being open and relaxed – we generally do not judge people. Because we're not rushed and we're not regulated as much there, your human interaction is softer. We don't take heart. But in some other aspects, our sarcasm is higher than what Singaporeans are used to.

Another form of reverse culture shock is also apparent in the manner in which children are raised, with returning migrants having a different set of priorities about raising their children. Habsah explains:

> I see Singaporeans sending their children for enrichment classes at such a young age. For me, I'm not going to rush my son. I've seen how my brother raised his children in Australia and I like it that way. In Australia, they don't push their children academically whereas here in Singapore, it's very competitive. That is one thing I'm not looking forward to. And I feel, because I didn't grow up in Singapore's stressful education system, I feel that it is unfair to put my children through that.

Return migrants also expressed their dismay over the competitiveness and frenetic pace of life in Singapore that, to them, has worsened since they last left Singapore. The pace of life in Australia is described as 'slow', 'laid-back', and less 'regulated' which provides idyllic portrayals of Australia. Life for migrants can be very challenging and hectic even after some years of residence in the country due to the high living costs and encounters with forms of discrimination as newcomers into the country (Noble and Scott 2008). In truth, such idealizations are common among returning migrants globally. Having gotten used to ways of living overseas, they find returning home to be akin to a downgrade in lifestyle. George Gmelch argues that return migrants' negative evaluation of life in their home countries in comparison to the host countries may sometimes be perceptual rather than real. Needless to say, such idealization of life before return migration may contribute to problems coping with their new lives, leading to disillusionment and alienation (Gmelch 1980).

Responses from the interviewees, however, show that as an institution, the National Service accelerates the re-acculturation of returning migrants back to Singapore society. For the first few months, as trainees, they share a communal living space with other Singaporeans. Initially, as all of them acknowledged, communication was rather difficult. Having been out of Singapore for a while, they did not understand the local lingo, terms, and references made by their peers. They were often teased for their Australian accent, for which Syed recalled: 'When I was serving my NS, some of my coursemates teased me, but eventually they got the hang of it [my accent] and I succumbed to Singlish and left behind my Australian accent . . . I learnt the culture; I camouflaged myself *lah*'.

Nonetheless, the pressure to conform to the norms of the larger social group meant that my interviewees had to re-adapt to the local accent. Faced with social pressures and not wanting to be marginalized, my interviewees, like all return migrants compromise some aspects of their identities to fit in without totally succumbing to the culture of their home country (Cassarino 2004). They must strike a balance between accepting the entrenched 'Singapore-Malay' or 'Malay-Singaporean' hyphenated identities emphasized by the state, and their more cosmopolitan Australian identity, where race or ethnicity is not a major determinant in public life (Subhan 2014). Even so, when asked if there are people who viewed him with envy for having lived and studied overseas, Syed admitted: 'Oh yes, of course there are. They feel that just because I studied in Melbourne I am more "superior" than them'.

Networks of friends and families have also proven to be useful in re-settling in Singapore – this is especially true of young males who return to serve their National

Service, where they were without their families. To fill this absence, many turn to and reconnect with friends from primary and secondary school. For Syed, National Service became an integral part of his life when he signed on to the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) as a regular. He saved up money for marriage and a move back to Australia. Some preparations had to be made before moving to Australia. While the move to Australia did not materialize, he continued to be employed in SCDF.

Returning to serve the National Service seemed rather straightforward in terms of preparation and expectations. Having relatives in Singapore meant that these young men were not faced with the difficulty of finding their place to stay or paying rent – both of these would be difficult considering the high cost of living in Singapore. Being a single young man-made it easy for my interviewees to stay with relatives as they could have roomed with a male cousin of similar age. Additionally, the period of National Service was fixed, so interviewees knew that they needed to put up with this arrangement only for that period of time.

- *Psychological Adjustment*

Returning to Singapore also involved a process of psychological readjustment. Responses from my interviewees reveal that they were rather self-conscious and hesitant to reveal their migratory past among their peers. Coming from Australia is not something that they would readily share with their peers. On the surface, this may point to a 'return of failure' that Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants felt about themselves. However, the failure–success dichotomy, as a recent study of Chinese migrants explains, is inadequate to unravel the inner feelings of return migrants (Wang and Cindy Fan 2006). There is a desire among Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants to remain inconspicuous within a larger group setting to be accepted as part of the group and not to risk being left out of the group as a result of differences. There is also an acknowledgment or at least an awareness of the privilege of having stayed, studied, or been raised in Australia – the interviewees remain modest strategically as a means to downplay this difference and as a means of avoiding labeling and prejudice.

Such reactions are also in line with the experiences of return migrants in other parts of the world, among which are the Turkish return migrants from Western Europe. To gain acceptance in the mainstream Turkish community, return migrants tended to adopt a subtractive identity shift, both psychologically and in social interactions. This is achieved through sharing less about their previous lives in the host country and trying hard to lessen the cultural gaps that may develop between them and the locals (Kunuroglu, van de Vijver, and Yagmur 2016). Like the Turkish return migrants, Singapore Malay-Muslims chose to hide their true feelings regarding their identity. As expressed by Habsah, 'I think identity-wise, I'm still very much Australian inside. I think my choices and the things I do are different . . . So I would say, this is my temporary home'.

Interviewees cited another psychological challenge: a sense of loss and loneliness. Furthermore, different genders saw what they had lost differently and manifested their loneliness in different ways (Girma 2017). For women, they cherish the hopes of reuniting with their families in the host societies. Being married to a Singaporean meant that Habsah left behind her parents in Australia even as she started a new family. She

acknowledged the strong emotional and psychological support given by her husband and in-laws in overcoming this emotional and psychological challenge:

> I think because I was getting married, with all the excitement and wedding preparations, I didn't fully realise that I was moving back to Singapore. I don't think I prepared at all . . . The first few months after I came to Singapore, it was hard, it was really hard.

Among men, loss and loneliness are usually linked to why they chose to return, or rather hopelessly, why things did not turn out the way they had wanted them to in Australia. Indeed, if women are concerned most with social loss, men seem more concerned with truncated aspirations that may partly include the loss of family and friends. The estrangement among both men and women migrants is coupled with the fact that the Singapore they returned to had seemed rather unfamiliar, especially given the rapid urban development of Singapore. Syed mentioned: 'It was difficult to adapt to life back in Singapore. Everything was fast-paced. I didn't know where I was'.

Most interviewees acknowledge that regular visits during the time they lived in Australia did not help them cope with the changes in Singapore. The sense of unfamiliarity and displacement could perhaps be attributed to a sense of nostalgia and childhood innocence, as much as the physical changes to the Singapore landscape from the late 1990s. Reminiscing on life in Singapore before he left, Bob said:

> Singapore was good. We used to hang out a lot. All my best friends and I used to go and ride our bicycles around and have these little mini adventures . . . To this day, I still kind of miss all that . . . Maybe it was nostalgia, but growing up in Singapore in the early 1990s was kind of nice . . . Singapore was different back then, it has changed a lot since.

- *Pragmatic Employment Choices*

When asked if they knew what kind of preparations they had to make before returning to Singapore, all interviewees acknowledged that they had to 'search for a place to stay' and, most crucial of all, 'look for a job'. Similar to how they had to restart their lives in Australia, migrants returning to Singapore permanently require extensive preparations to restart their lives in Singapore. According to the interviewees, the usual route taken by new migrants to supplement their income in Australia is to rent out their property in Singapore. In addition to being a source of income, this also provides a safety net in the event of an unexpected return. In this regard, should a family fail to secure permanent residency in Australia, they return knowing that they will have a place to stay in Singapore. But upon returning, that source of income is lost. While return migrants globally usually exhibit a high tendency toward self-employment upon returning home, because of the high cost of living in Melbourne as well as in Singapore, Malay-Muslims return migrants could not accumulate enough savings to enable themselves to be self-employed (Ilahi 1999). Compared to Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, and Chinese return migrants from Australia, who have returned to their countries toward upward occupational mobility, the skills and qualifications of Malay-Muslim return migrants have acquired in Australia are for the most part not in high demand within the job sector in Singapore.[7] They thus take on a pragmatic approach to employment choices.

All interviewees admitted that the experience of being Australian has made them more realistic and creative about gaining employment in Singapore. Syed offered an interesting

anecdote of how he was offered a job at a clothing retail line whose regional manager was Australian:

> I went into the store to buy some clothes, and I met the manager. She asked me, 'Are you from Australia, mate?' and I said, 'Yeah, I'm from Australia, I just came back from Melbourne'. She asked me what I was going to do in Singapore and I told her that I was waiting for my National Service. She said, 'Oh, might as well you'd be working for us'. And that was how I got a job.

Still, I notice that these returning migrants have been unable to get jobs that they preferred given the competition in Singapore. Their long absence from the country denied them occupational networks. In that regard, they experienced the same liminality they experienced as children of migrants in Australia, who saw their parents taking any jobs they could find. The common approach is to take anything that comes without thinking too much over the prestige of the job or whether it fits well within their qualifications. Collectively, the interviewees have attempted the following jobs – bus driver, *tradie* (tradesman), emcee, language teacher, nurse, social media marketer, farm assistant, computer programmer. Part of this can be attributed to the lack of social pressure to conform to educational expectations in Australia. Nasir shares his experience:

> After dropping out of school midway [in Australia] I decided to learn by myself. We had a lot of [free] time but we didn't know how to use that time. The day time is super long, and we don't know what to do at times. I had a background on information technology so I decided to teach myself computer programming. I bought books on Amazon and eBay, any kind of books with regards to programming . . . In Australia, it felt like the possibilities were limitless. It's like you've been living in a cave and then you walk out of it and see this vast forest in front of you.

Nonetheless, the caveat is that having come from Australia, none of the interviewees have successfully commercialized or monetized their experiences or successfully profited or benefitted from their Australian social networks. It can be said that return migrants do not act as agents of change who bring in 'new ideas, knowledge, and entrepreneurial attitude' (Haas 2010). They have not successfully tapped into the skills and networks acquired in Australia for personal and national gain in Singapore. At most, they simply act as advisors for potential migrants who are considering migration to Australia.

## Conclusion

It is evident from the above account that one key reason explaining the return to liminality among Singapore Malay-Muslim return migrants is that they are generally of non-elite status and therefore lack the resources and networks that could facilitate their reacculturation into the Singaporean environment. Belonging to a minority population in Singapore with long-standing problems of high divorce rates, rampant delinquency, low educational status, and whose status as a 'problematic community' is still enduring adds to the difficulty of these return migrants to start over new lives on the island-state (Mutalib 2005). Granted that Singapore does have a deliberate policy of assisting and retaining return migrants, the Malay-Muslim return migrants I spoke to, however, felt that they were left to make it on their own in a very competitive and fast-paced atmosphere where foreign talent has been brought in large numbers in recent decades. To be

sure, the Singapore government's foreign talent policy has raised questions over the limited opportunities given to the local workforce population aside from problems of integration that have arisen between foreign migrants and local as well as returning Singaporeans.[8]

This is aside from the stress that return migrants faced in resettling families while relishing the lives and acquaintances they left behind in Australia. A recent study by Chan Kwok Bun and Viviene Chan Wai-Wan underscores this point. From the 10 Singaporean respondents, the researchers interviewed, it was found that 'Almost all said they will move again. An analysis of their backgrounds shows that they are indeed highly mobile. Examining their life histories, it was discovered that some respondents have left Singapore more than once. To deal with this new reality, both nation-state and citizens need to face up to this fluidity, ambiguity, and transience' (Chan and Chan 2021).

That they are permanent residents of Australia and at the same time citizens of Singapore make Malay-Muslims return migrants feel they are neither here nor there, between and betwixt two worlds. Some cope with this painful state by choosing to see Singapore as a temporary place to ground their children and allow them to develop a sound understanding of Islam and appreciation of Malay culture instead of migrating again to Australia. As Awie explains:

> We're trying to get the best of both worlds. In Singapore, it's good for the children's Islamic education . . . But the nature is so much better in Australia than here. It's so much easier to go to parks and enjoy nature for what it is . . . Over in Australia, there's just so much options for you to explore.

Bob in turn said to us:

> I would like to live in Perth – Perth sounds really nice for me. I wouldn't mind settling in a place like that – I do enjoy Australia's values, and the space . . . Even when you go to East Coast (in Singapore), there is no horizon. There are lots of ships there . . . I kind of miss that (seeing the horizon) – seeing nothingness, you just feel like a sense of space. I would like my kids to have that.

Others such as Habsah find life in Singapore to be suffocating for herself and her children: 'Over here, the emphasis is so much on academics . . . When children come back home, they have homework and all . . . There's just not much family time, and I don't want to go through that'. All, the feelings expressed by the interviewees about their place in Singapore suggest that their position can be described as liminal. They do not entirely feel at home or settled in Singapore.

Although this paper does not aim to provide solutions to such feelings of liminality, I suggest that grassroots and civil society movements in Singapore (also referred to as migration-focused CSOs) could consider implementing programs to help reintegrate these return migrants into mainstream society. Such programs, which have been pursued in Asia-Pacific countries such as Australia to integrate return migrants, should focus on equipping return migrants with the cognitive and social tools needed to manage their subjective struggles as individuals who are neither entirely Singaporean nor Australian while objectively accepting the realities of being in a place they have not yet called home. To date, no such initiatives have been widely practiced, except for those who are talent-spotted and headhunted to return and take

up employment in high-paying positions, the majority of which are held by Singaporean Chinese (Ortiga et al., n.d).

The success of these efforts largely depends on the willingness and readiness of return migrants to fully integrate into a community they may no longer feel part of, as well as the support networks available to them. These are challenging questions that return migrants whose minds are still longing for return and whose sense of belonging remains uncertain, have to unravel; questions that may inspire further research. Beyond the experiences of Singapore Malay-Muslim migrants, this article has argued for a new concept – the return of liminality – that return migrants are faced with. I am aware of limitations in this study's sample size. More research is needed on coping strategies and the challenges faced by return migrants through the lens of the 'return of liminality' to further validate this conceptualization of diasporic communities pushed to return to their place of origin.

## Notes

1. For a critical review of critical engagements with Cerase's typology, see (Cassarino 2004).:
2. Male participants spent two years within this period in Singapore serving their National Service.
3. See: https://fass.nus.edu.sg/srn/2018/05/18/cosmopolitan-adaptation-as-strategy-for-muslim-immigrants-in-the-west/
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), "Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia – Stories.
   from the Census, 2016 – Cultural Diversity". The data presented covers 'Country of birth by religious affiliation'.
   3,753 does not include Australian born Malays with ancestral origins from Singapore.
5. Defaulters can be fined 'not exceeding $10,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to both'. See: https://www.cmpb.gov.sg/web/portal/cmpb/home/before-ns/offences
6. https://www.cmpb.gov.sg/web/portal/cmpb/home/parents-guide/what-you-need-to-do/exit-permit-and-bond
7. See various chapters in (Iredale, Guo, and Rozario 2003).:
8. The integration of foreign talent and migrants issue is discussed in (Yap, Koh, and Soon 2015).

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