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## Section B

Answer **either** Question 4 **or** 5.

**Either** 4 Read the passage carefully, and then answer the questions that follow it:

Neng stood by the squeaky gates seeing the last person from the funeral off. She didn't even know who he was. Perhaps one of the men who worked with her husband on the boat. She looked up and saw the clouds getting darker. They were swollen and black, like puffs of burnt cotton. And then Neng remembered the chickens. They were in the back somewhere and the gates to the coop were closed. She had seen it in the morning through the window. They would be climbing over one another to get into the coop now. The rooster on top of the hens and the chicks. Neng started to run, going faster, and faster – racing against the clouds. Her heart pounding, she finally reached the gates and opened them just as the clouds too, opened and let the first drops of rain fall to the ground. 5 10

She watched the chicken scurry into the coop, the proud and beautiful male at the very front. Then all at once, the rain came down hard, making it difficult for her to see. She would've wiped her face but everything was wet. Her dark green *sarong* was drenched, sticking to her legs and hips. She squinted and saw all the chickens were in. Safe. She thought she had better get into the house now. 15

Neng walked slowly, careful not to step in some of the puddles that were already forming. She looked at her house. It was leaning, as if it supported too much furniture on one side. Neng knew that it was not true because she arranged what little furniture they had in the house herself and it was balanced. *Balance was important*. Her house looked tired, no longer willing to support the imbalance. Neng stood still, feeling the rain running down her legs and swirling around her ankles before joining the rest of the orangey water in the puddle. She closed her eyes and breathed in the air. It smelled so sweet that day – jasmine blooms, *kemenyan* smoke and fresh rain. 20 25

The rain became softer, and Neng opened her eyes. It was stopping. She sighed, and continued her walk to the front of the house. She sat on the bottom step. Now out of the rain, she stretched her legs in front of her. The mud on her feet was beginning to cake. I should wash them, she thought. But she didn't move. Neng looked over to her garden and saw the leaves that were wet from the rain. They looked like children who have taken a bath in the shallow yellow river behind her house, and ran home without drying themselves first. Many times she had wanted to yell, "*Kesat tubuh dulu, lepas tu demam*. (Wipe your body, lest you develop a fever)" But she didn't. Her husband would not have approved. 30 35

Neng's husband was a good man. Everyone in Kampung Sungai Laut said so. He worked hard everyday. He was a fisherman and left the house early every morning before dawn and came home only when it was dark. And on Fridays, before going to the mosque for his prayers, he would take all her vegetables to the market. All her work in the garden, all her fat green cucumbers, her almost bursting long beans, her red chillies, all would go to waste if it wasn't for her husband. There wasn't a day that he wasn't working. Neng was lucky to have him. Her husband was a good man, and if he beat her, it was her fault. 40 45

Neng was stupid. Her husband had told her that many times. If she was not stupid, she would not do the things she did which made him angry. That was why he beat her. Neng hid her bruises. From people, *orang* kampung Sungai Laut. Not that she had so many opportunities to meet them. Her husband made sure that she kept to herself. Only now there would be no 50

more bruises. Her husband was dead.

Neng looked into the small puddle by the steps and saw the reflection of her own face. No black or blue, just brown. Neng pulled the neckline of her *baju* Kedah and looked at her chest. A little purple from the last one, but it was fading. And there would be no others to replace it. Her body felt different – as if it wasn't hers. Neng rubbed her chest. She could hear the chickens squawking in the coop, anxious for the rain to stop. The squawking got louder, and she thought she could hear her husband's voice among them, calling her. *Mek*. He never called her by her name, but that generic term for women. *Mek. Mek. Mek*. It wasn't real but she could remember when it was. She had been in the house when she heard him that time.

"Mek," he called from the yard.

She ran down, almost slipping on the steps. As soon as she reached the ground, her bare feet touching the brown earth, he grabbed a fistful of her hair, dragging her to his drying net and said, "Do you see that?" Her hair was pulled so tightly that Neng couldn't move her head, couldn't see anything. He turned her head with a jerk, and Neng could see a tear in the net. She saw a feather next to the tear.

"It's one of your chickens."

"You didn't close the gate to the coop last night, did you?"

It was not a question, so she didn't answer. He let go of her hair and slapped her across the face. She went down on her side.

"Get up."

She got up to her knees. Another slap. She went down again, tasting the familiar saltiness of her blood.

"I said, get up."

As if she hadn't done as he'd asked before.

She got up.

The slaps came again and again and again until he was tired. Then he would talk to her. As he always did.

"Why do you do such stupid things?" he asked.

She was on her side, but her face was turned toward the ground, she waited for the ringing in her head to go away.

"Why is it that I work so very hard everyday and you cannot even keep the gates closed. Why do you do these stupid things?"

Neng got up slowly. She wiped the blood from her torn lip, careful not to look into his eyes. Finally, looking at the chickens in the coop, he said, "God gave you brains, why can't you think?" For every time that he has asked that question out loud, she had wondered the same thing herself. She had no answers for him, nor for herself.

She was sitting on the steps, wondering the same things even now, even when he was already dead. She wondered why she didn't close the coop that night.

(i) In what ways does the author make the passage intriguing to the reader?

(ii) What feelings do you have for Neng in the course of the passage?

Remember to refer closely to the passage.