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SARE

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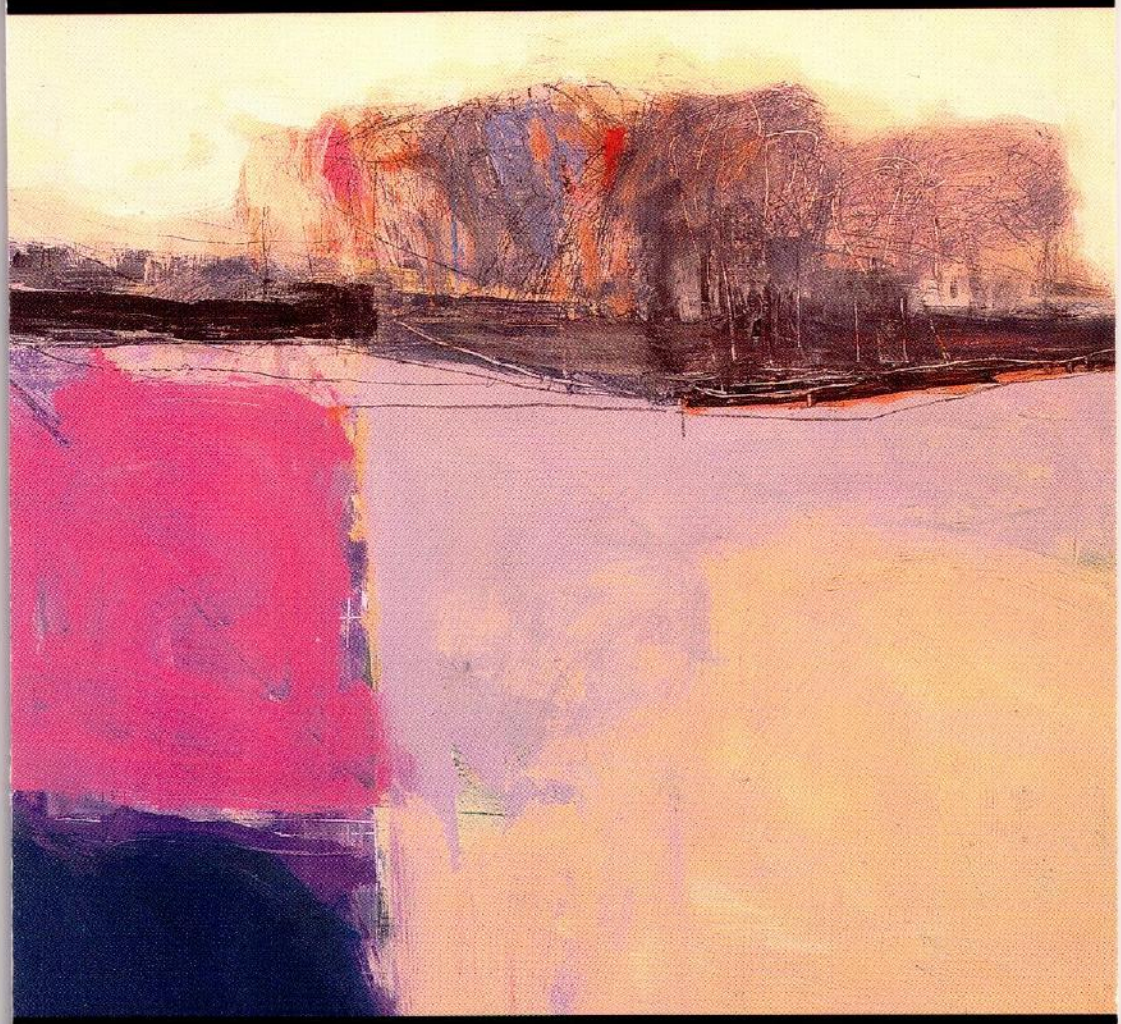

Journal of the Malaysian Association
for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

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Journal of the Malaysian Association
for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

Aims and Scope

SARE is an internationally refereed journal with a particular interest in writings from the Commonwealth. It explores the cultural and intellectual aspects of the Southeast Asian region and issues connected with language and literature.

Submissions and Preparation of Manuscripts

Two copies of the typewritten manuscript prepared according to the MLA Style (or according to the Harvard System for articles on linguistics and stylistics), can be submitted to The Editor, SARE, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Alternatively, e-mail attachments can be sent to any of the SARE editors listed. The editorial board cannot undertake to return any manuscript unless it is accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and return postage. All manuscripts will be refereed.

Manuscripts should not normally exceed 30 pages and should be typed double-spaced on one side only of the A4 size paper with a 3 cm margin all round. Pages should be numbered consecutively at the top right hand corner throughout. A cover sheet should include author(s) name(s), affiliation, full postal address and e-mail address, telephone and fax numbers where possible. Spelling should follow that of the Oxford English Dictionary. Double quotes with single quotes within should be used, whilst passages of more than 50 words should be indented. Please avoid 'generic' he and 'authorial' we (for I). Notes should be placed at the end of the article and tables as well as illustrations should be typed on separate sheets and their position indicated by a marginal note in the text.

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Editorial Note

The 2002-2003 issue of SARE received warm response from academics and some members of the Malaysian public. We hope our subscribers will continue to find the journal useful and interesting. This year's issue consists of several articles examining the colonial influence in literature. More pertinent is the fact that these articles try to examine certain aspects of the colonial experience through post-colonial eyes. We also decided to publish an interview with Malaysian poet Wong Phui Nam as we felt it was important that we continue to record the thoughts of one of Malaysia's finest poets in the English language. The theme of colonial influence is heard in the poet's thoughts and ideas for Wong is in many ways representative of the first post-colonial generation of Malaysians.

We are delighted to include in our international advisory board Professor Bharathi Mukherjee of the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Mukherjee presented a lecture here in Kuala Lumpur last year. Professor Supriya Chaudhuri of Jadavpur University and Tim Cribb of the University of Cambridge have also kindly consented to be on our advisory board. We are indeed thankful to all members of the board for providing criticism and feedback with regard to the articles that are published in this volume. Finally, we hope to receive more papers for our next issue themed "Asian Perspectives of America".

The Mohammedan Subject in Conrad's 'Malay World'

Agnes Yeow

"We are going amongst a lot of Mohammedans,"
he explained.
(The Rescue 288)

Conrad once referred to the Eastern seas as the locality from which he had "carried away into [his] writing life the greatest number of suggestions"(*Notes on My Books* 154). Doubtless, some of these suggestions are crystallized in his re-imagining of the Malayan Isles and the "brown nations"(*Youth* 18) which inhabit them. In his life of letters, the inaugural stage had been "the Malayan phase with its special subject and its verbal suggestions"(*NB* 23). Why indeed did Conrad find the Malay Archipelago so "special" or even suggestive? One reason could be the historical and material reality of the region itself at the time of Conrad's brief but significant sojourn in the 1880s: the last quarter of the nineteenth century had seen the political and socio-economic restructuring of British colonies in Southeast Asia. It is no coincidence that Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published just a year before the Federated Malay States, a new political unit in the British sphere of influence, was carved out and formed in 1896. In such an exciting and challenging epoch for British enterprise, a writer could not have been better placed or inspired to participate in "the creation of a world"(*Notes on Life and Letters* 6) than Conrad himself.

In the scramble to represent the East for the crowds of readers back home, Conrad joins the ranks of colonial administrators like High Clifford and Frank Swettenham who also wrote versions of the "Malay"and the "Malay world." Conrad's voice is not drowned out in this polyphony and arguably lays the template for an imaginary and functional landscape while setting and establishing many of the rhetorical modes in which the "Malay world" is subsequently discussed and negotiated in fiction and beyond. In this sense, his vision may be regard-

ed as seminal as well as exemplary: giving other writers "some starting point [. . .] something to begin with"(*Collected Letters* 1: 288). This vision is also extremely complex and as GoGwilt points out, "maps the fault lines between the colonial mapping of Southeast Asia and its still emerging postcolonial form"(86). In striving to give imaginative shape to his sense of a "Malay" identity and ethos, Conrad's discourse is decidedly ambivalent: his rhetorical construct of the "Malay" unsettles the construct of the colonizer. This ambivalent register is especially evident in his treatment of the politico-religious aspect of the "Malay."

The focus of this essay is the interpellation of the Mohammedan subject in Conrad's "Malay world." In this imaginary space, the author reconstitutes the "facts" but one fact which he accurately preserves is that the Malay is of course, a Mohammedan. In attempting to forge a political identity for his Malays, Conrad is not unaware that "Malays," whether they were of Bugis, Sulu, or Javanese origins, were Mohammedans (the term commonly used at the time for believers of Islam). Islam had arrived in the region in the fourteenth century and had rapidly become the religion of choice for Sultans, Rajahs and chieftains as well as their followers. In the nineteenth century (and even to some extent today), to embrace Islam was synonymous with entering Malaydom. "Every Malay was a Muslim. It was a national status as much as a religion. A convert to Islam was said to become a Malay (masuk Melayu)" (Gullick 277). Khoo Kay Kim writes that "irrespective of what factors may be basic to the western concept of "nation," to the Malays, the elements which contribute more significantly to their distinct identity have always been their culture, language and Islam"(139). For the Malay, religion is an intrinsic part of identity, and Europeans had conflicting views of this phenomenon. Isabella Bird observes in *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*: "The Malays are bigoted, and for the most part ignorant and fanatical Mohammedans, and I fully believe that the Englishman whom they respect most is only a little removed from being "a dog of an infidel" (140). Frank Swettenham begged to differ: "He is not a bigot"(*Malay Sketches* 5).

Conrad himself did not offer a direct opinion of the Malay Mohammedan either in his letters or essays, but the fiction suggests that generally, his "gentlemanly" Malayo-Muslims were benign and moderate believers unencumbered in the practice of their faith. This portrayal seems to suggest a complicity between the man of letters and the men of government. Even as the colonial state had undertaken to administer the

native states via Indirect Rule, "[c]olonial statesmen had a clear idea of what sort of Malay they should protect. [. . .] The real Malay of colonial discourse was rural, loyal to his ruler, conservative and relaxed to the point of laziness. [. . .] The dominant element of the Malayan Civil Service took the view that its role was to protect the stereotyped Malay identity, not to change it. Clifford, the most sentimentally paternal of the governors, insisted as late as 1927, when effective power was wholly in British hands, that there must be no change in the Islamic monarchies which Britain was sworn to protect"(Reid 17). This non-threatening stereotype presumably extended to the Malay's religious stance. In the fiction, the only instance of religious fundamentalism (perceived as an anti-Dutch resistance) is a cursory reference to the Padris of Sumatra. Jorgenson relates his "brush" with the puritanical Mohammedans to Lingard: " 'Belarab's father escaped with me,' [. . .] 'and joined the Padris in Sumatra. He rose to be a great leader. Belarab was a youth then. Those were the times. I ranged the coast – and laughed at the cruisers; I saw every battle fought in the Battak country – and I saw the Dutch run; I was at the taking of Singal and escaped. I was the white man who advised the chiefs of Manangkabo' "(*The Rescue* 102).

Mirroring historical reality, Conrad's romanticized "Malays" are Mohammedans albeit with varying degrees of piety. Even the British reader with no knowledge at all of Malays (actual or fictional) will infer this from the text despite the numerous references to animism, superstition and the occult. In the tales, there is a large group of Mohammedans whose syncretic blend of folk magic, superstition, and "Mohammedan usage"(*TR* 74) results in a propensity to fetishize the "white lord." In Patusan, even the "wisest shook their heads" and were convinced of Jim's "supernatural powers" (*Lord Jim* 266). The tales are also punctuated with hajis, pilgrims both returned and en route, invocations to Allah, as well as references to pilgrimage,[iv] the Holy Shrine and the Koran. Conrad's Malays revere Arabs and especially the syed, a male descendant of the Prophet himself. From Haji Wasub in *The Rescue* to Haji Babalatchi in *Almayer's Folly* to Haji Saman in *Lord Jim*, returned pilgrims are in almost every major Malay story to come out of Conrad.[v] Haji Wasub, the boatswain of the Lightning, "had been twice a pilgrim, and was not insensible to the sound of his rightful title"(*TR* 16). In Conrad's fictional "Malay world," hajis are venerated and have a place in the political life of the Malays: Haji Saman's "'words had a great weight' "(*LJ* 362) among

Patusan Muslims and "[t]hat holy man Ningrat"(172) in *TR* is clearly a haji and an ulama[xi]. The mosque is a conspicuous structure in the Settlement of "pious Belarab"(*TR* 373) and Mrs. Travers recoils at the sight of "a man in a long white gown and with an enormous black turban surmounting a dark face. [. . .] an enigmatical figure in an Oriental tale with something weird and menacing in its sudden emergence and lonely progress"(*TR* 260). Mrs. Travers's cryptic summing up of the political tensions and diplomatic standoff on the *Shore of Refuge* is a tacit acknowledgement that for the Malay, politics and religion are not mutually exclusive: "Religion and politics - always politics!"(367) In *Lord Jim*, Sherif Ali's[xii] white-cloaked emissaries raise the cry of jihad in the market-place:

> One of them stood forward in the shade of a tree, and, leaning on the long barrel of a rifle, exhorted the people to prayer and repentance, advising them to kill all the strangers in their midst, some of whom, he said, were infidels and others even worse - children of Satan in the guise of Moslems (295).

In Conrad, the Haji or pilgrim is metonymic of the faith itself of which the believers are not always mute paper cut-outs, colourful "people in a book"(*LJ* 260), or part of an iconic and impressionistic backdrop. True to Conrad's double-writing, and notwithstanding the exoticism that a Haji may embody, it is through the lens of an occult-minded (to western eyes, "ignorant") Mussulman that an ironic commentary of the Tuan putih is articulated. Almayer's longsuffering servant, Ali, is often bewildered and dismayed by his master's "strange doings," concluding finally that the foolish Almayer "had turned sorcerer in his old age"(*Almayer's Folly* 202). Almayer's determination to forget his daughter Nina who had left him for her lover (thus crushing her father's extravagant dreams of a splendid life with her in Europe) leads to despair and delirium. Ironically (though rather aptly), Ali reads his master's rapid psychological and physical decline as that of a man who had called up a malevolent and stubborn spirit and could not get rid of it:

> Ali said that often when Tuan Putih had retired for the night he could hear him talking to something in his room. Ali thought that it was a spirit in the shape of a child. [. . .] Master spoke to the child at times tenderly,

> then he would weep over it, laugh at it, scold it, beg of it to go away; curse it. [. . .] His master was very brave; he was not afraid to curse this spirit [. . .].(*AF* 202)

In "An Outcast of the Islands", the same Ali boasts a "knowledge" of Lingard's "occult" powers to the watchman:

> The watchman hinted obscurely at powers of invisibility possessed by [Almayer], who often at night . . . Ali interrupted him with great scorn. Not every white man has the power. Now, the Rajah Laut could make himself invisible. Also, he could be in two places at once, as everybody knew; [. . .] (317)

In the inquiry into the disgraceful abandonment of the Patna by her white crew, the "extraordinary and damning" native helmsman called to the witness-stand does not believe that Jim and company had jumped ship to save their own lives: "There might have been secret reasons. He wagged his old chin knowingly. Aha! secret reasons. He was a man of great experience, [. . .] he had acquired a knowledge of many things by serving white men on the sea for a great number of years [. . .]" (*LJ* 98-8). In *The Rescue*, there is an interesting discussion of Captain Tom Lingard among his Malay crew. The store-keeper intones:

> Have you heard him shout at the wind - louder than the wind? I have heard, being far forward. And before, too, in the many years I served this white man I have heard him often cry magic words that make all safe. Ya-wa! This is truth. Ask Wasub who is a Haji, even as I am." (47)

To this, a crewmember remarks that he has seen white men's ships wrecked like their own praus. The store-keeper Haji answers sagaciously that the white men are all "the children of Satan but to some more favour is shown" and that the charms such white men possess "protect his servants also"(48). Having sailed six years with Lingard, the defender of the white man's magic claims "great knowledge of [Lingard's] desires"(48).

The implication appears to be that the white man's actions and behaviour are mysterious, "irrational," arcane, and duplicitous and can

therefore only be explained in the same terms. This destabilizes the authenticity of not only the "knowledge" gleaned by the Malay from service with the white man (which does not change his superstitious or occult perception of the world but in fact, reinforces it) but also the colonial knowledge of the Tuan Putih "who knew his Malays"[viii] (*AF* 318). The irony is double-edged: the Malay-Mussulman and his belief in what Jim dismisses as "bally rot"(*LJ* 266) and what Lingard ridicules as "these charm-words of mine"(*TR* 202); and the strange, elusive motives of white men themselves. In "The End of the Tether", the ingenuous lascar who overhears the "endless drunken gabble" of the second engineer and the vulgar ranting of the odious Massy is ironically struck with amazement: His heart would be thumping with breathless awe of white men: the arbitrary and obstinate men who pursue inflexibly their incomprehensible purposes - beings with weird intonations in the voice, moved by unaccountable feelings, actuated by inscrutable motives. (224)

The Serang of the Sofala, who has served many years with "various white men on the sea," had "remained as incapable of penetrating the simplest motives of those he served as they themselves were incapable of detecting through the crust of the earth the secret nature of its heart"(*TET* 228).

Foil to this category of believers who display a tendency to magnify the white man's abilities in occult terms are those who demonstrate a faith in a state of philosophical flux. In "Karain: A Memory," Karain's "wizard" is a Haji who is reluctant to play the shamanic role assigned to him as pre-Islamic practices might easily conflict with the teachings of the Prophet. "Karain" features a tale within a tale: the inner tale is narrated by Karain who tells three English gunrunners how he had betrayed and killed a friend and how this friend's "ghost" haunts and terrifies him. The Haji had been entrusted with the task of protecting him and now that the Haji has died, Karain is vulnerable again. Here, he confesses to his listeners:

> You all knew [the Haji]. People here called him my sorcerer, my servant and sword-bearer; but to me he was father, mother, protection, refuge and peace. When I met him he was returning from a pilgrimage, and I heard him intoning the prayer of sunset. He had gone to the holy place with his son, his son's wife, and a little child; and on their return, by the favour of the Most High, they all died: the strong man, the young mother, the little

> child - they died; and the old man reached his country alone. He was a pilgrim serene and pious, very wise and very lonely. I told him all. For a time we lived together. He said over me words of compassion, of wisdom, of prayer. He warded from me the shade of the dead. I begged him for a charm that would make me safe. For a long time he refused; but at last, with a sigh and a smile, he gave me one." (*Tales of Unrest* 42)

Historically, the Haji's rejection of magic and other pagan accretions (where seeking protection from jinn and the evil eye through the wearing of charms and amulets was common) signals a mood for theological reform and ferment which was in its infancy in the last twenty five years of the nineteenth century.[ix]

Significantly, after the death of his "sorcerer," it is to the three white men (an unnamed narrator, Hollis and Jackson) that Karain implores: " 'Give me your protection - or your strength!' he cried. 'A charm . . . a weapon!' "(*TU* 45). Hollis exploits this great idea of the white man's power to help the tormented Bugis war-chief (whom they assumed were not "very strict in his faith"[48]) subdue his 'ghost.' The makeshift charm he fashions out of the Queen's Jubilee coin and other knick-knacks becomes the lifesaver of the Malay whose belief in the white man's powers is unshakable despite the latter's "denials and protestations"(*TU* 12). Read as allegory, "Karain" may be easily mistaken as an affirmation or triumph of Empire; the Malay-Muslim's "puritanism doesn't shy at a likeness"(51) and his liberation by the colonial charm symbolizes a form of "spiritual" subjection to the Queen, the "Invincible, the Pious"(49). Nevertheless, it is an ambiguous victory: the England that the narrator and Jackson encounter some years after this episode is an illusory, infernal and sombre setting, prompting Jackson to imagine an atavistic similarity between Karain's dark, unreal "ghost" story and "home." This pessimistic critique of western civilization (represented by the gloomy and chaotic metropolis) is underscored by the troubling suggestion that the "civilized" Unbeliever is not far removed from the "savage" Believer.[x] In the cabin of the schooner (itself a symbol of western progress), the uneasy narrator sees Hollis's collection of miscellaneous knick-knacks (a bit of ribbon, needles, etc.) and discerns the "Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! [. . .] All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace - all the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world"(48). GoGwilt argues that Hollis's

makeshift charm projects "an alienated image of their own culture to the white sailors" since it is cobbled hastily out of various meaningless, discrete objects and is "part Catholic, part folk, part symbol of the British Empire"(61). However, like the Mohammedan and his "part Islamic, part folk" practices, the narrative also serves to imply an ironic homogeneity between "one of us" and "one of them." In Lord Jim, it is also ironic that Jim, son of a parson and therefore part of the "unbelieving West" should find redemption from the "ghost" of his guilt among the "lot of Mohammedans" in his kingdom.

As we have seen, the reluctant sorcerer in "Karain" is perhaps an exception to the rule apart from Lord Jim's "war-comrade"(*LJ* 261), Dain Waris, of whom it is said that he had a "European mind"(262) and presumably does not believe in "bally rot"(266). Nevertheless, there is yet another crowd of believers in Conrad's tales who are inevitably in a league of their own: Arabs[xi]. The dynamics of Arab identity in Conrad's fiction warrant attention, especially since both in history and in fiction, they were deemed natural-born leaders of the Malay-Muslims who held them in high regard. The respect and reverence that some Arabs inspired were also due to the title "Syed" before their names. A Syed was a male claiming descent from the Prophet and thus commanded great respect among the local Muslims who saw Syeds as figures of religious knowledge and authority, piety, and even occult power.

When in "The Shadow-Line", the narrator describes his ship-owning employer as an "excellent (and picturesque) Arab," the parenthetical aside is suggestive of fault lines within the text. The Arab is also a Syed:

> [. . .] an Arab owned [the ship], and a Syed at that. Hence the green border on the flag. He was the head of a great House of Straits Arabs, but as loyal a subject of the complex British Empire as you could find east of the Suez Canal. World politics did not trouble him at all, but he had a great occult power amongst his own people. [. . .] I myself saw him but once, quite accidentally on a wharf - an old, dark little man blind in one eye, in a snowy robe and yellow slippers. He was having his hand severely kissed by a crowd of Malay pilgrims to whom he had done some favour, in the way of food and money. His almsgiving, I have heard, was most extensive, covering almost the whole Archipelago. For isn't it said that 'The charitable man is the friend of Allah?' (5-6)

The discourse suggests that he is 'representative' of Straits Arabs ("He was the head of a great House of Straits Arabs"), and in that light, there does seem to be a conflict between the assertion that "World politics did not trouble him at all" and the fact that the dominant Arab role in the texts revolves around politics on both a local and global scale. Significantly, in the Lingard tales, Syed Abdulla, "Son of the rich Syed Selim bin Sali, the great Mohammedan trader of the Straits"(*OI* 109), was coveting not only Lingard's commercial successes but also his political ones. It is Lingard's "political and commercial successes"(*OI* 111) which Abdulla envies. His defection to the Dutch side also reflects a strategic and deliberate move to play off one colonial power against another. What was "World politics" at that moment in history if not imperial politics. It is also ironic that "The Shadow-Line's" Arab is a loyal subject of the colonial state because Conrad's most important Arab is the same Syed Abdulla bin Selim, a Straits Arab whose political allegiance shifts according to his convenience, prompting an outraged Lingard to exclaim indignantly: " 'But, hang it all! [. . .] Abdulla is British!' "(*OI* 179). Arguably, the Arabs' exclusion or inclusion in colonial discourse is predicated on their economic strength, their prestige among the local Malayo-Muslims, and their unique propensity to integrate commerce, politics, and religion. Europeans generally viewed Arabs with suspicion and distrust, regarding them as wily, ruthless, and piratical.[xiii] It is unfair to second-guess Conrad's own feeling for Arabs but his portrayal of Arabs does display a surplus of meaning. For instance, the half-caste, racially-split Eurasian, Nina, who has consciously chosen to "perform" Malayness rather than her Dutch-European side, denounces the very people that her Malay kinsmen hold in high esteem: " 'Arabs are all cowards' "(*AF* 47). In choosing to identify with her Malay descent since it "seemed to Nina that there was no change and no difference" between "civilized morality" and "the hopeless quagmire of barbarism"(42-3), she has ironically embraced a colonial stereotype of the Arab, suggesting a conflict between the rhetoric and authorial intention.

In the Lingard stories, the tendency to seek the Syed's blessed counsel and support is illustrated perfectly in "An Outcast of the Islands" where Babalatchi and Lakamba (Malays of Sulu and Bugis origins respectively) appeal for Syed Abdulla's intervention in the horrid matter of Almayer. Babalatchi complains to Abdulla that Lingard, Almayer's partner, had "[taken] possession of Patalolo's[xiv] mind" (115) and therefore of

the trading privileges of Sambir. This does not augur well for the Arab who intends to sail up Lingard's river and usurp the white man's monopoly of trade. At the council, the verbose and obsequious Babalatchi showers Syed Abdulla with deferential sobriquets: "First among the Believers", "Giver of alms", "Uplifter of our hearts", "Protector of the oppressed", "Dispenser of Allah's gifts", "First among the generous" (116-121). Abdulla and his "great family lay like a network over the islands. They lent money to princes, influenced the council-rooms, faced - if need be - with peaceful intrepidity the white rulers who held the land and the sea under the edge of sharp swords; [. . .]"(*OI* 110). The mysterious deluge of letters exchanged between the Arab and the rest of the "Malay world"almost certainly implies Arab patronage and benefaction in trade, in the Faith, and in politics:

> In every port there were rich and influential men eager to see him, there was business to talk over, there were important letters to read: an immense correspondence, enclosed in silk envelopes - [. . .]. It was left for him by taciturn nakhodas of native trading craft, or was delivered with profound salaams by travel-stained and weary men who would withdraw from his presence calling upon Allah to bless the generous giver of splendid rewards. And the news was always good, and all his attempts always succeeded, and in his ears there rang always a chorus of admiration, of gratitude, of humble entreaties. (italics added; *OI* 111)

The precise nature of this "immense correspondence" can only be inferred with the help of pointed clues like "silk envelopes." An epistolary thread links the Malayo-Muslim community with the Arabian elite not unlike "the many threads of a business that was spread over all the Archipelago"(109). The "immense correspondence" is also a condensed metonymic figure for imperialism itself where one can only too easily imagine the volumes of letters, dossiers, files, and reports conveyed between the colonies and the Colonial Office in London over the course of colonial history itself. The "empire" that the Arab elite is seen to spearhead may not be as tangible as European empires but it is arguably, an "invisible" empire based not just on trade but also on faith, a "pan-Islamic," globalized empire of Believers.[xiv]

It can be ventured that the Arab elites' benevolent paternalism towards Malayo-Muslims and their status as bearers of a superior Islamic

culture are comparable to the Europeans' "civilizing mission" in the colonies and the latter's claim of "racial prestige"(*LJ* 361). Robert Hampson comments that Babalatchi's grouse to Abdulla about Lingard's monopoly is "a mirror-image of the European rhetoric of liberation"(111). The implication is that Arabs are moved by the same "liberation" rhetoric and thus may be prevailed upon to ally themselves with the unhappy Malays. Strategically, Babalatchi couches his appeal in the language of Muslim solidarity: "That unbeliever kept the Faithful panting under the weight of his senseless oppression. They had to trade with him - accept such goods as he would give - such credit as he would accord. And he exacted payment every year . . ."(*OI* 115-6).

For the European "rescuer" and "protector" of the Malays, the Arab's own "rescue work"(*NLL* 13) may plausibly constitute an affront. Lingard, the self-styled bringer of prosperity to the Malays of Sambir, intends to " 'keep the Arabs out of [his river], with their lies and their intrigues. [He] shall keep the venomous breed out, if it costs [him his] fortune' "(*OI* 45). For Lingard, Arab intrigue and enterprise spell oppression for the Malays: " 'Great pity. They will suffer for it. He will squeeze them. Great pity' "(*OI* 173). Almayer is disheartened by the "unscrupulous intrigues" and "fierce trade competition" posed by the Arabs. "The Arabs had found out the river, had established a trading post in Sambir, and where they traded they would be masters and suffer no rival"(*AF* 24). Granted that the embittered and Indies-born Dutchman, Almayer, is not one that readers back "home" would identify with, one would sympathize with Lingard for his convictions, "honourable" intentions and commitment to his Malays (although he too would ultimately betray his aristocratic friends). Nonetheless, whether or not Lingard's trenchant prejudice of Arabs underlies Conrad's own engagement with his Arabic characters remains undecidable. As far as Mohammedans and other characters are concerned, "no one group is idealized; rather our sense is of a succession of displacements and power struggles, internally and externally fuelled by a common human greed"(White 187). This greed transcends race, culture and religion: the powerful Malays and Arabs of Sambir are hoping that Almayer would lead them to the fabled treasure further inland, the same rumoured gold that Lingard was supposed to have discovered.

As reflected in his fictional Arabs, Conrad saw Arab identity as a matrix of imperial issues and local politics. Nevertheless, as Conrad was

a romantic anti-imperialist who critiqued the powers scrambling for hegemony in the region ("the vices and virtues of four nations" namely, "the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and the English"[*TR* 3]), it is only reasonable to assume that for him, Arab imperialism had its own share of "vices and virtues." Although the Dutch and British may have implicitly found their match in the Arabs, there is the sense that a clash of civilizations leads to a pyrrhic victory. At the end of *AF*, with the "respectful throng" making a path for him, Abdulla makes his way towards his old enemy's (Almayer) corpse. Even as the crowd choruses "May you live!" there is sense of futility in victory, a sense that the white man's defeat is also the Arab's defeat, a sense of mortality even among "superior," "civilized" beings. Death is the ultimate equalizer and check on the battle of "titans:" "Abdulla looked down sadly at this Infidel he had fought so long and had bested so many times. Such was the reward of the Faithful. Yet in the Arab's old heart there was a feeling of regret for that thing gone out of his life. He was leaving fast behind him friendships, and enmities, successes, and disappointments - all that makes up a life; and before him was only the end. Prayer would fill up the remainder of the days allotted to the True Believer!"(208).

Nina Almayer's reflection that avarice, overweening ambition, hypocrisy and unscrupulousness afflict all regardless of creed is pertinent here: "Whether they traded in brick godowns or on the muddy river bank; [. . .]; whether they plotted for their own ends under the protection of laws and according to the rules of Christian conduct, or whether they sought the gratification of their desires with the savage cunning and the unrestrained fierceness of natures as innocent of culture as their own immense and gloomy forests, Nina saw only the same manifestations of love and hate and of sordid greed chasing the uncertain dollar in all its multifarious and vanishing shapes"(AF 43). However, an aporia betrays certain racist assumptions evident in the idea that although humanity is fundamentally the same, Christianity is in binary relation with savagery and culture with nature.

It is also significant that, in embracing Malayness, the infidel Nina disengages her "Malay kinsmen"(43) from their Mohammedan identity; her reversion to savagery suggests a Malayness that is identified not with the faith but with a pre-Islamic ethos of "savage glories," "barbarous fights," and "savage feasting"(42). Notably, just as her savage mother, a Catholic convert, had a "little brass cross"(41) on which to fix her super-

stitious eye, religion (whether Christianity or Islam) had been reduced to a "theological outfit"(41) of charms, talismans, myths, and strains of religiosity void of any genuine spiritual depth. In the words of the disturbed narrator in "Karain:" "Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! Charms that keep them straight, that drive them crooked, [. . .]"(*TU* 48).

In Conrad's fictional 'Malay world,' the othering of the Mohammedan doubles as a gaze into the hollowness of the Infidel's self. It also appears to 'justify' the white raj in that the myth of the Tuan Putih's supernatural strength and might is perpetuated by a hybridized form of Islam which incorporates folk beliefs in the occult. In the fiction, the Arab also wields "great occult power"(*The Shadow*-Line 6) among the local Malays, presenting the colonized with an alternative centre of authority and prestige and posing a tacit challenge to the colonizer. In a way, Conrad's image of the Mohammedan also unsettles his national narrative: the idea of British moral and cultural supremacy is eroded by a sense of sameness rather than difference between Believers and Unbelievers. Like Nina, the text has "lost the power to discriminate"(*AF* 43) and this is why, as imperialist discourse, Conrad's tales remain polemical and problematic.

Endnotes

i In his study of Malay society in the late nineteenth century, J. M. Gullick concludes that "[t]he Malay villager was normally relaxed and tolerant in his religious outlook" (292).

ii Appointed Residents were to advise the rulers on all matters except those related to custom and religion.

iii Conversely, Hugh Clifford pondered over whether Islam could pose a potential threat to Empire and explored this apprehension in his fiction. In the short story, "Our Trusty and Well-beloved"(Malayan Monochromes), the natives plot a jihad against the colonial regime only to be foiled by the 'Tuan Gubnor'. Clifford who had had some first-hand experience with Malay rebels also wrote that "if those against whom he rebels chance to belong to any other faith, no matter what the cause of the quarrel, no matter how lax the rebel's own practice may be his revolt is at once raised to the dignity of a sabil Allah, or holy war against the infidel [. . .] in this lies the real strength of the Muhammadan population"(Studies in Brown Humanity 229).

iv In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British seemed unperturbed

by any change in religious attitudes among the Malays. William Roff describes the perceived British nonchalance towards returned pilgrims: "British colonial officials, though sharing the prevailing view of returned hajis as "leeches on the toil of their fellow men,"seldom thought them, as did the Dutch in nineteenth-century Indonesia, to be sources of serious social unrest, and far from attempting to restrict the pilgrimage actually did much to assist it"(*Origins* 71). In stark contrast to this, during the nineteenth century, Dutch suspicion of the hajis and the haj itself as probable saboteurs of colonial administration is demonstrated in the fact that the majority of pilgrims from the Netherlands Indies had to depart to Saudi Arabia from the Straits Settlements and not from any Batavian-held port. For Anthony Milner, "[t]he fact that they departed from the British colony reflects the anxiety of the Dutch government about the political consequences of the haj"(*Invention of Politics* 159).

v Jim himself had been busy conveying 800 pilgrims to the Holy City on the Patna before the journey was so fatefully interrupted. The fact was that in the nineteenth century, steam power had enabled many more Muslims in the Malay world to perform the haj or pilgrimage to Mecca. Singapore was the regional embarkation point for "that pious voyage"(*LJ* 15). In this way, colnial communications had inadvertently re-vitalised the older network of the Pan-Islamic world or dar al-Islam through which traders, scholars, and missionaries had disseminated new knowledge, ideas, and attitudes since the thirteenth century.

vi A religious scholar and teacher.

vii If there is any category in Conrad's text which exposes the slippage between signifier and signified, it is piracy. In Conrad, piracy seems linked with Arabs. The Arabic honorific "Sharif," like "Syed," denotes a male kinsman of the Prophet, and in the Malay world, oddly or not, many a "pirate" chief was a Sharif (also rendered "Serip," "Serib," "Sareib," "Sirib," "Sarib," etc. in vari ous documents): for instance, Serip Sahap and Serip Mular, leaders of the Sekrang Dayak sea-robbers who resisted Brooke's offensives in Borneo. In Conrad, this group of Sharif pirate-chiefs is represented by Sherif Ali, " 'an Arab half-breed, who, [Marlow believes], on purely religious grounds, had incited he tribes in the interior [. . .] to rise, and had established himself in a fortified camp [. . .]' "(*LJ* 257). In *TR*, the Koran-toting Sheriff Daman "looks like an Arab"(175) and is the leader of the Illanun pirates. The pious Arab, Omar el Badavi in OI, was also a pirate and the leader of the Brunei rovers. The combination of piracy and religion was not as incongruous as it seemed.

With the introduction of Islam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, new "pirate" converts/Hajis would gradually incorporate the notion of jihad or "Holy War" into their vocation. Bernard Vlekke notes that "[f]or [coastal Malay] traders, the chapter on the spreading of the Holy Word was one of the most interesting parts of the Koran. If directed against pagans, the propagation of the faith by the sword was not only justifiable but even highly laudable. This combining of piety with piracy was a wonderful expedient, and the petty kings on Sumatra's north coast grasped their opportunity"(53).

viii It was said of Rajah Brooke that he "knew his Malays" and had "an instinctive understanding of the Malay mind"(Payne 33, 43).

ix Khoo Kay Kim suggests that, initially, the Islamic intellectual ferment or 'insurgence' of the early twentieth century was not so much consciously anti-colonial as it was symptomatic of 'a mood for change'(138). This view is also held by Peter Riddell in Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses: "[. . .] the old world familiar to Southeast Asian Muslims was to undergo rapid change during the 19th century. Colonial powers gained varying degrees of control over the daily lives of Malay Muslims, with dramatic results. Old dogmas came to be increasingly put to the test and found wanting. As the 19th century closed, other solutions were sought for the new problem of external colonial domination. Furthermore, new theological approaches were explored as the dominance of a cult of continuity gave way to a new cult of change" (204).

x In Chapter 2 of his book, GoGwilt discusses Conrad's attack on "the fallacies of distinguishing between "civilization" and "savagery"(54).

xi Arab immigrants in the Malay archipelago were from the Hadhramaut region in Yemen and did not arrive as unskilled workers but as traders, mercenaries, scholars, and missionaries. Some even went on to become statesmen, leaders, and rajahs of their host societies, founding new sultanates like those of Perlis in the peninsula, Siak in Sumatra, and Pontianak in West Borneo. Like the Straits Chinese, the Arabs born and domiciled in the colonies (by Conrad's visit, Singapore Arabs were two or more generations removed from their Hadhramaut-born forefathers) played an important role in the colonial state. Their economic contribution may not have equalled that of the great farming syndicates of the Chinese but the main Arab families like the Alkaffs, the Alsagoffs, and the Aljunieds, were incredibly rich philanthropists and were involved in shipping, real estate, moneylending, agriculture (tea, pepper, gambier), and so on. They also controlled much of the inter-island trade. It

was as a steamer trading in local products that the S. S. Vidar with Conrad on board as chief mate, was calling at Borneo and the Celebes. It belonged to "a Syed at that"(*The Shadow*-Line 5): Syed Mohsin bin Salleh Al Joffree, a renowned and respected merchant of Singapore who also owned the trading posts at Bulungan and Berau.

xii Raffles despised the Arabs but perhaps because he resented their hold over the Malays and their 'presumption' to act as spokesperson for their indigenous fellow-believers. The following statement from Raffles is startling in its unbridled contempt: "[. .] [Arabs] worm themselves into the favour of the Malay chiefs, and often procure the highest offices in the Malay states. They hold like robbers the offices they obtain as sycophants, and cover all with the sanctimonious veil of religious hypocrisy. Under the pretext of instructing the Malays in the principles of the Mohammedan religion, they inculcate the most intolerant bigotry and render them incapable of receiving any species of useful knowledge"(qtd. in Mohd. Redzuan 85).

xiii The fictional Rajah of Sambir, Lingard's "old friend"(OI 43).

xiv In 1892, a group of agitators, including Arab sada (sing. syed/sayyid), seeking to remove the British from the peninsular Malay States, had declared an alternative sovereign to the British Queen, namely the Turkish Sultan, and an alternative empire, namely the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

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Impartial Charioteer or Manufacturer of Reality?

Interrogating the Fictional / Historical Governor-General in Ben Okri's Infinite Riches

David C.L. Lim

Introduction

Ben Okri's abiku trilogy - made up of *The Famished Road* (henceforth *TR*), *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*), and *Infinite Riches* (*IR*) - is set in an unnamed, unborn African nation on the verge of achieving independence from colonial Britain. The word Nigeria never once appears in any of the three novels, but there are good reasons to read the trilogy with Nigeria in mind.

First, the trilogy is filled with objects and animated by rituals which are very much part of Nigeria's, or at least West Africa's, lifeworld. The calabashes of palm-wine, the egungun procession and the ritualistic sacrifices to appease the gods are just some of more obvious, concrete examples. Second, we know that Azaro, the trilogy's child-narrator, is an abiku, that abiku is a Yoruba term for spirit-child or "thief from heaven" (McCabe 2002: 46), and that belief in the abiku phenomenon is prevalent in southern Nigeria. Third, the chain of crisis moments in the trilogy is similar in many ways to real-life events in Nigeria's bloodied history. They include coups and riots, tribal massacres, famine, explosions at oil sites, the genocide of civil war and decades of hardship to come. Lastly, although there is no mention of the names of the tribes 'quarrelling with one another, disputing their myths of supremacy and their legends of the origin of all things' (*SOE* 20), we almost instantly think of, amongst an estimated two-hundred and fifty to six-hundred and nineteen ethno-linguistic groups, the three main tribes (ethnic groups) in Nigeria: the Hausa-Fulanis, the Yorubas, and the Igbos, respectively predominating in North Nigeria, the West and the East of South Nigeria. Not unlike the

warring factions described in the trilogy, they coexist as one nation on precarious grounds due to antagonistic nationhood ideals. To paraphrase Okri (1994a): the Islamist North fears the secret domination of the 'pagan' and Christian South; the South in turn fears the eternal domination of the North.

That many interesting parallels can be traced between the trilogy and Nigeria does not imply, of course, that Okri's treatment of history and politics is reducible to a simple matter of objectively ascertainable and verifiable facts. Neither does it imply that the trilogy must always be read in the context of Nigeria's political actuality, as if there is nothing more to the work than that. As Okri himself has noted, 'the first thing I'd say is that I think it's important to understand that a piece of writing is, first of all, a piece of writing. By that I mean that one may be writing about Nigeria, but that terrain may be the place in which one can best see very strong universal concerns' (in Ross 1993: 337).

By the same token, however, there is no compelling reason why we should not examine the trilogy in terms of it historical embededness, especially if doing so opens up a new, previously-unexplored dimension to the work. For our immediate purposes, *IR* - the third volume of the trilogy - is noteworthy not only because it is by far the angriest work Okri has produced to date, but also because it completes the puzzle, so to speak, showing us that there is indeed more than meets the eye in the foreboding refrain we find in *TFR* and *SOE* that the unborn nation has been aborted even before its birth. As will be made clear in this paper, regardless of whether Okri intended it or not, *IR* appears to be encoded with a little-known, counter-hegemonic account of Nigerian history, an account which charges that Nigeria's textbook history of independence was a reality Nigerians never lived (*IFC* 297).

The Governor-General

To explain, I would like to begin by examining the figure of the Governor-General in *IR*, Okri's new character who by virtue of his nefariousness eclipses everyone else in the novel. An "Englishman with a polyp on the end of his nose" (*IR* 110), this highest-ranking colonial officer of the unborn nation is not a character in the full sense of the term. More a caricature and a whipping-boy whose prime function is to demonstrate white racism, he is described as the leader of "a country whose people he did not like much, and seldom saw except as shapes

with menacing eyes and too many languages, too many gods, [and] too many leaders" (*IR* 36).

For the Governor-General, contemplating Africa amounts to ruminating aloud to his languid, tropics-detesting wife on Africa's otherness, its blackness of skin, unreason and inferiority. In one scene, he toys with two alternatives. Is Africa a "pathological" aberration, an accidental effect of higher creation, as Ovid's Metamorphoses suggest? (In Ovid's account, the wilful son of the sun-god brought the sun-chariot so close to Africa that the skin of its inhabitants became permanently scorched.) Or is Africa the abjured cause of western civilisation, as Herodotus suggests? (According to Herodotus, Africa, through Egypt, contributed to ancient Greek civilisation, which in turn gave birth to Western civilisation.) After a moment's reflection, the Governor-General decides to go with Ovid's theory. The choice allows him to continue to misrecognise the inversion of his worldview, that the presupposed otherness of Africa is the very support of his racist fantasy of western superiority, as well as the 'blood of the continent' which 'sustain[s] his divine status in the universe of humanity' (*IR* 205).

That the Governor-General should choose to enjoy Africa and the three African women who consoled and bore him seven illegitimate children, is entirely consistent with his role as he who, with his white man's power and in sloping calligraphic hand, rewrites Africa's history:

> [He] deprived us of history, of civilization, and unintentionally,
> deprived us of humanity too . . . And as [he] rewrote time
> (made his longer, made our shorter), as he rendered invisible
> our accomplishments, wiped out traces of our ancient civilization,
> rewrote the meaning and beauty of our customs, as he abolished
> the world of spirits, diminished our feats of memory, turned our
> philosophies into crude superstitions, our rituals into childish dances,
> our religions into animal worship and animistic trances, our art into
> crude relics and primitive forms . . . as he rewrote our past,
> he altered our present. (*IR* 111-2)

Reading *IR* against Nigeria, it is possible to show that Okri's Governor-General may well have been inspired by, if not an allusion to two prominent British colonial figures who had served in Nigeria: Sir Frederic Lugard and particularly Sir James Robertson. Like many British administrators, Lugard (the first Governor-General of Nigeria, 1914-9)

> and show them a means, by trading, of becoming rich and comfortable and safe, and before you know where you are they want to drive you out, imagining that they can govern themselves because one or two have been educated.
> (Isichei 1983: 391)

In comparison to Lugard whose real-life racism makes the racism of Okri's 'fictional' Governor-General seem a little benign, his colleague, Sir James Robertson (the last Governor-General of pre-independent Nigeria, 1955-60), has been portrayed more kindly by mainstream historians. In his book, The Story of Nigeria, Michael Crowder, a well-known historian, described Robertson as 'the ideal man to represent Britain during the final phase of [Nigeria's] self-government' (1973: 290). Sir Gawain Bell, a former colleague of Robertson in Sudan and the Governor of Northern Nigeria between 1957-62, effused: "He worked untiringly to preserve the unity of the Federation [of Nigeria] and to forestall or prevent anything that might damage it . . . To him too, Nigeria owes a substantial and lasting debt' (Bell 1989: 107). Margery Perham, who penned the foreword to Robertson's memoir (and also Nigeria's national anthem), Transition in Africa, too was all praise. Robertson - like Lugard whom she described as "the pride of his country" (Perham 1956: vi) - had displayed "'dignity and imperturbability"as the Governor-General of Nigeria. He was "like a charioteer whose task was not to choose the course or the winning post but to keep his three highly spirited horses running in unison" (Perham 1974: xiii).

The three "horses" here refer to the tribal leaders of the three rival political parties in Nigeria near independence: Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of NPC (Northern People's Congress), Nnamdi Azikiwe of NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens, in the East), and Chief Obafemi Awolowo of AG (Action Group, in the West). All three contested in the 1959 elections under Robertson's auspices. The elections were most critical in the history of Nigeria as they were to decide who would have governing control of the country upon independence on 1 October 1960, and whether the would-be nation would begin life with its integrity intact or mortally compromised. It is not unlikely that they were the same elections Okri had in mind when he wrote in *IR* that the "elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation" (337) and set in motion a chain of catastrophic events that is the history of Nigeria's bad infinity: "coups, exe-

cutions, scandals, . . . uprisings . . . and the four-year war" (188).

If the 1959 Nigerian elections are the same elections indirectly alluded to in IR, does history in turn bear witness to the trilogy's refrain that the election "results had already been decided in advance" (*IR* 176) - "rigged" (57) in a word? Was Robertson, like Okri's "fictional" Governor-General, "made a chief by a tribe in return for a favourable decision in a fierce boundary dispute with another tribe" (*IR* 158)? And was he truly an impartial "charioteer" who did not 'choose the course or the winning post' but kept "his three highly spirited horses running in unison", as Perham vouches (1974: xiii)?

Comprehensive third-party accounts of Robertson's role in Nigerian history are conspicuously hard to come by. The few that are available are sketchy at best. In Crowder's The Story of Nigeria (1973: 169), for example, Robertson is mentioned but once and in passing at that. Coleman in his seminal book, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (1958), sums up the Governor-General's role in one short paragraph. Isichei's *A History of Nigeria* (1983) does not even have Robertson listed in the index. That Robertson should receive so little attention from historians is extremely curious, if we take into account Perham's claim that he had not merely presided over the formal stages but played the role of an active mediator whose influence greatly shaped political events leading up to Nigeria's independence (1974: xii).

From the little that is available, it is clear nonetheless that Robertson, like Lugard, was more a friend to the North than he was to the South. Southern leaders, his memoir reads, were argumentative, uninhibited and vociferous troublemakers "who noisily showed [their] disagreement in Council or Parliament without good manners or restraint" (1974: 223). By contrast, Balewa, the main 'horse' from the North, was a 'man of the highest integrity' (Robertson 1974: 214). Robertson wrote that he and Balewa had become so close in the course of their friendship that there was 'little [they] could not discuss' (1974: 214-5). So close, in fact, that he saw no reason why he should not have invited Balewa to form federal government 'before the results of the [1959] elections were announced (but presumably when they were already known)' (emphasis added, Osaghae 1998: 33).

Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik), the leader of NCNC and the Eastern "horse", lambasted Robertson's invitation to Balewa as "premature and inept" (Robertson 1974: 235). Robertson responded in his memoir by say-

ing that Zik was probably disgruntled because he wanted to be the Prime Minister, which was not an unfair point to make since Zik had and had been expected to lead independent Nigeria for the reason that he had fought for and won Nigeria's independence. Furthermore, Zik had the largest number of supporters in both the North and the South (Omoruyi 2001). Instead he was sidelined, 'tricked' into resigning his seat in the House of Representatives and accepting the position of President of 'the rubber stamp Senate.'

To understand how this came to be and the implications to which it gives rise, we need to remember that the momentous 1959 elections produced no clear winner. None of the competing parties secured the required majority to independently form government, which meant that a coalition had to be formed. Eghosa Osaghae argues that had national interest been a priority, NCNC (East) and AG (West), together with their alliance parties in the North (representing mostly ethnic minorities residing in the NPC-dominated North), would have been "in the best position to form a coalition" (1998: 32). That was because NCNC and AG had a much larger national spread in comparison to NPC (which only managed to secure token votes outside the North, and which furthermore "refused to be drawn out of its regional shell"). What emerged instead was an NPC-NCNC (North-East) coalition and the installation of Balewa of NPC as the country's first Prime Minister, a man 'considered by some as a puppet to the Sardauna [of Sokoto]', Sir Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, 'the most powerful man in the north' (Hatch 1971: 219). The decade following the unlikely deal were to see Nigeria erupting into a series of military coups, counter-coups, and a bitter civil war which claimed over a million lives and dispossessed an estimated two to three million (Osaghae 1998: 69).

Why did an NCNC-AG coalition not eventuate? Robertson reasoned that NPC would not have countenanced a Southern government, which was what an NCNC-AG coalition would have been. Britain would not have countenanced it either, ostensibly for fear of the North pulling out of the Federation and putting the entire independence plan in jeopardy if the North did not have (at least some) control of parliament. Osaghae is correct to point out that once the favoured status of NPC was made clear, the question of coalition was no longer a theoretical one; it was simply which - the AG or the NCNC - the NPC leaders were willing to work with. (1998: 33)

What Osaghae is effectively saying is that NPC had always-already

forewon the elections, just as the elections in Okri's abiku trilogy has been forewon by an unnamed political party which proudly proclaims through a loudspeaker that "VICTORY IS ALREADY OURS. WE HAVE WON. WE BRING POWER TO THE PEOPLE. WE BRING WEALTH AND STABILITY. THOSE WHO VOTE FOR US WILL ENJOY, THOSE WHO DON'T WILL EAT DUSTBINS!" (*IR* 228)

To return to the question I posed earlier: did Robertson have a hand in the Islamist North's forewinning of the elections? Was he, like Okri's Governor-General, the type who would, if he were guilty of treason against Nigeria, destroy 'all the secret documents, all the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation, the redrawn boundaries, memos about meetings with religious leaders and political figures' (*IR* 36)? And could IR possibly be alluding to Robertson and other key players in Nigerian history when certain political thugs in the novel confess that they had masters above them, a hierarchy of masters, who never committed crimes, whose hands were always clean, and who delegated the thoughts, the acts and the consequences of their crime and wickedness to lesser beings, to their minions, their servants and their disposable friends? (*IR* 57)

As if to preempt blame, Perham, in defence of Britain and Robertson, wrote:

> It must be accepted that no British administration, handling the tense, final process of colonial emancipation, could have re-made situations which resulted from hasty frontier-making in the malleable Africa of the preceding [i.e., nineteenth] century. (1974: xiv)[iii]

Robertson, on his part, appears to have had a clear conscience too. Like Perham, he attributed Nigeria's failure to circumstances beyond his control. The country failed, he wrote, despite the perfectly-sound federal constitution - 'freely negotiated and accepted by all the political party leaders' (Robertson 1974: 256) - which he had helped to create. The right structures were in place but 'the force of tribalism was greater than anyone had estimated' (1974: 256). Furthermore, he said, 'many of the politicians were corrupt and aimed at their own enrichment'. Robertson's argument is not without merit: tribalism and corruption were (and still are) widespread. However, detractors would argue that tribalism and corruption were not the only causes, and that Nigeria's

'abortion' had plenty to do with his having created in the first place the political climate which gave the North the political upper-hand over its neighbours in the South.

The Conspiracy

The Eurocentric little that has been published on and by Robertson does not directly attest to this, but there exist internet-published essays which allege that Whitehall (British civil service) officials had 'freely admit[ted]' in private that they had rigged Nigeria's Independence Elections..The author of these essays, Harold Smith, who identifies himself as a former British Government senior civil servant at the Department of Labour in pre-independent Nigeria, says that he knew Robertson personally and that, for his refusal to remain quiet about Britain's alleged rigging of the 1959 elections, he had been threatened by Robertson, bribed by Margery Perham on Robertson's behalf, poisoned, and subsequently 'erased' from the files of the British government.

Smith's charges are scandalous, to say the least. But do they bear up to scrutiny? To be sure, they have not been corroborated by the established academics, historians and so forth. Also it remains unconfirmed if he is truly who he claims to be. That, it should be qualified, does not mean that his account of Britain's role in Nigeria is necessarily fictive. Firstly, we should bear in mind that the internet has, in the last decade, become a crucial and credible new medium through which truths hitherto repressed by dominant discourses are brought to the surface. Consider, as example, the home-grown Malaysian portal, malaysiakini.com. Without it, English-reading Malaysians would be deprived of access to a dedicated source of news and views which offer alternative perspectives to those disseminated by government-controlled media.

Secondly, it serves us well to remember that the British had committed the same act of "treason" in Malaya/Malaysia as it is accused of in Nigeria. To quote Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore: "the British plan was to have an independent Malaya with Malays in charge - Malays who would nevertheless need them for some time to help govern the country and fight the communists" (1998: 225). Lastly, Smith's story does seem bona fide, supported as it is by first-hand details and inside information on the main players. And they come complete with the reference numbers of letters from the British Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence granting Smith permission to publish the essays on the inter-

was famous for his unapologetic racism, a trait which colonial players like Margery Perham saw not as a crime but as benevolence:

> To Lugard and the other makers of the new empire, Africa was a place of poverty, ignorance, and of unremediable cruelties. Above all, they had seen the helplessness of Africa in the grip of slave-trade. They had no doubt that the greatest conceivable good for this unhappy continent was for it to come under the rule of civilized powers. (Perham 1956: 712)

Lugard was also well-known for his contempt for the "pagan" and Christian South (where ethnic Yorubas and Igbos are respectively preponderant in the West and the East of South Nigeria), and for his partiality towards the feudal Islamist North (numerically dominated by the Hausa-Fulanis). Once while observing a parade of the Eastern chiefs of Calabar, he reportedly exclaimed that it was 'the most wonderfully comic sight I have ever seen in Africa! The very antithesis of the dignified Mohamedan Emirs of Northern Nigeria in their flowing robes with their medieval civilisation' (Isichei 1983: 391).

Lugard's friendliness towards the North was not just motivated by his belief that the North possessed a "superior" civilisation (allegedly infused by the regenerative powers of Aryan and Hamitic blood through Islam). Neither does it appear to be motivated simply by the political expediency of indirect rule. There was probably 'some more deep-seated neurosis at work', writes Elizabeth Isichei (1983: 391). Lugard loathed the westernised, christianised and more educated Southerners, and reserved for them his most venomous ridicule and hostility because they resembled him most closely and had taken his culture as a model. He saw them as 'infernally bumptious' creatures who 'think themselves superior to everyone, white men included' (Isichei 1983: 391). (Southerners were generally known to be more vocal, combative and nationalistic in comparison to their Northern counterparts.) To further incense Lugard, they had the temerity to reject colonialism and demand for independence even though they had not, in his view, 'shown themselves to be possessed of ability to rule either [their] own community or backward peoples of [their] own race, even under favourable conditions' (Coleman 1958: 158). Lugard says:

> You free them, you give them equitable laws, more or less,

net, provided names are withheld.

Of course, these supporting factors do not by themselves confirm the truth or accuracy of Smith's claims, just as history books are not in themselves a 'heaven of truths' (Badiou 2001: 43) simply because they are available in print. Thus, for the purposes of my discussion, Smith's account should at best be taken as a marginal counter-discourse which may well become hegemonic in the future. At the minimum, it serves as a compelling narrative that enables the reader to better appreciate IR's anger at the wounding of the nation's destiny.

If official historical accounts only go so far as to suggest that Robertson may have inadvertently created a pre-independence political climate which favoured NPC, Smith's essays come right out to say that there was nothing inadvertent about it. It was not that 'Sir James [Robertson] would do anything dishonourable on his own initiative to diminish or discredit Nigeria', Smith is careful to qualify in our email exchanges.5 Rather, as 'part of his code of duty and honour' as an officer, he was compelled to carry out Whitehall's and Westminster's orders without question. Smith explains in his essays that:

> The name of the game in handing over Nigeria to the pro-British North was to make safe a vulnerable target for Soviet penetration. An oppressed colony was assumed to be an obvious target for Soviet imperialism. A newly 'independent' nation safely inside the Commonwealth with moderate and responsible, i.e., pro-British leaders, would expand the free world. (1991-7)

Smith contends that although Britain's attitude towards Nigeria was coloured by Lugard's pro-North racism, it still had good reasons to believe that an NPC-led government would give the newborn country the stability it needed. Furthermore, as was well-known at that time, there were fears that an NCNC-AG alliance would tempt Southern leaders to settle old scores with NPC. That by itself was likely to have plunged the country into chaos and paved the way for its infiltration by communists. But "we will never know" if the worst-case scenario might have eventuated since Britain had "flagrantly destroy[ed] Nigeria's first experiment in democracy" when it decided the winner well in advance of the independence elections (Smith 1991-7). Omo Omoruyi, an Africanist scholar, has indirectly made the same point, underlining that Britain's fear that

the Sardauna of Sokoto would 'take his 'North' away' was illogical (2001). Although NCNC and AG were Southern parties, they had "representatives throughout the country including the North . . . So which 'North' would the Sardauna have taken away?" Besides, writes Omoruyi, "Who told Sir James that the three political parties (NPC, NCNC and AG) could not work together as a transitional measure within the first four years after independence?"

The extent to which Britain went to secure victory for NPC as detailed in Smith's essays is astonishing, to say the least. It did not merely involve a simple tweaking of the elections results. Rather there was a systematic effort to cripple the leadership of NCNC and AG years in advance of the 1959 elections. Zik (leader of NCNC in the East), whose activities had been monitored by British intelligence for some time, was charged and found guilty in 1957 of having improperly handled public funds. All that is well known but what remains untold, Smith argues, is that Britain had deliberately 'built in the legal loophole' which enabled Zik to use the funds to finance his political activities. Having thus set the trap, they allowed him to commit a minor breach which, over time, developed into a major misdemeanour. When the 'crime' became sufficiently serious, a tribunal was set up to find him guilty. Zik did not lose his Eastern support base as a result of the scandal (Crowder 1973: 291). But he had been politically neutered, for not only was he personally bankrupted, his 'great NCNC, the vessel which would guarantee him power, [was left] drifting on to the rocks. The British had struck at his weak point, the money needed for political action' (Smith 1991-7).

The same trap is believed to have been laid for Obafemi Awolowo (Awo), the leader of AG in the West of Nigeria. In 1962, he was charged, found guilty and jailed for having diverted money from a government corporation to fund AG's political activities. According to historian John Hatch, Awo's sentence was generally regarded as 'a political trial' set up by his opponents, 'particularly those in the federal government' [controlled by NPC], to ruin and remove him from public life (Hatch 1971: 227).

If Smith's claims are true, why do history books tell a different story? Why is he just about the only person to directly implicate the Governor-General in the abortion of Nigeria? Smith says that Robertson was not the 'blimp' journalists who witnessed and wrote about Nigeria's independence might have imagined. The Governor-General was "an Oxford-edu-

cated street fighter, experienced in covert intelligence, anti-Communist operations, terrorism and pulling the wool over inquisitive journalists" eyes' (Smith 1991-7). Put in terms found in Okri's trilogy, he was "a manufacturer, a retailer of phenomena" (IR 232). Many journalists had been lied to, others simply wanted to write about the British empire's finest hour. Then there were scholars like Michael Crowder (author of The Story of Nigeria) who, according to Smith, not only knew about the rigging of the 1959 elections, but was also blackmailed into writing a clean version of Nigerian history. Smith claims that Crowder was a close friend of his and 'a very promiscuous homosexual' whose dangerous lifestyle in Lagos was known to Robertson. He alleges that Robertson had used that knowledge against Crowder by asking him to persuade Smith to 'stop dabbling in politics', that is, to keep quiet about the rigging of the elections. Otherwise, Crowder might suddenly find himself embroiled in some sex scandal that would ruin his career. The end result was that Crowder was forced to make his peace with Robertson and thereafter omit vital details from his book.

How should all of this inflect our reading of the abiku trilogy? What would be the implications if we take the "fictional" Governor-General in *IR* as an allusion to Sir James Robertson, the last white Governor-General of Nigeria? And what is it that *IR* reveals but *TFR* and *SOE* do not?

IR does not merely afford the reader the strongest hints yet as to the identity of the unnamed, betrayed, and unborn nation in which the trilogy is set. What *IR* does above and beyond that is to put in historical context the possible reason for why the unborn nation is repeatedly described but never elaborated upon in *TFR* and *SOE* as always-already aborted. By repudiating the dominant history of Nigeria (as recorded by the likes of Crowder, Perham and Robertson) and subversively retracing the repressed history of Nigeria's betrayal, *IR* retroactively recasts *TFR* and *SOE*, thus making it clear to the reader that while the abiku trilogy is a work of fiction, it is neither divorced from history and reality, nor 'more introspective, more personal, less historically ambitious [and] less radical, than Achebe and his peers' (Nivens, in Hawley 1995: 37).

Endnotes

1 Okri, rather than enslaved by positivist historiography, transforms what he appropriates, often at the same time blurring the boundaries between history and myth, reality and dream, the real and the unreal. See my discussion of this in my doctoral dissertation, The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam (2002), Department of English, Australian National University.

2 The 'four-year war' seems to allude to Nigeria's first military coup and counter-coup which took place within a chaotic year (1966), and the succeeding three-year Biafran civil war (1967-1970).

3 Perham is here refering to the Berlin carve-up of Africa in 1885 by European powers for economic exploitation. Territories were parcelled off to colonial authorities, and cultural spaces and pre-existing political-economic units were arbitrarily dissected. Of the approximately fifty thousand miles of colonial frontiers, seventy-four percent were astronomical and mathematical lines (Nugent 1996: 41). Astonishingly, Africa's international boundaries 'cut through a total of 191 culture group areas, some of which were partitioned by more than one boundary' (Griffiths 1995: 91).

4 Harold Smith's essays are hyperlinked from http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk

5 Our email exchanges took place in August 2000. Harold Smith may be reached at hsmith@libertas.demon.co.uk.

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Mapping A "Naked" Psyche: Interview With Wong Phui Nam

Mohammad A. Quayum

Wong Phui Nam is one of the leading poets in the English language in Southeast Asia. He was born in 1935 in Kuala Lumpur and received his early education at the Batu Road School and later at the Victoria Institution. He studied Economics at the University of Malaya (then in Singapore) and has since graduation worked mainly in development finance and merchant banking. While at the University he was actively involved in The New Cauldron, a literary magazine founded by students of Raffles College which later became the University of Malaya. He was co-editor of Litmus One, an anthology of university verse.

Most of the poems he wrote during the 1960s first appeared in *Bunga Emas*, an anthology of Malaysian writing published in the United Kingdom in 1964 (Ed. T. Wignesan). They were subsequently collected in book form and published as *How the Hills Are Distant* in 1968 by Tenggara (Department of English, University of Malaya). He was silent through most of the 1970s and the early 1980s. In 1989, his second volume *Remembering Grandma and Other Poems* was published by the English Department, National University of Singapore. In 1993, Skoob Books, London brought out *Ways of Exile* as a "Collected" of his earlier poems, including those from Remembering Grandma written before the 1980s. Blackwater Books, Kuala Lumpur, published *Against the Wilderness*, his most recent volume, in 2000.

Wong's poems have been anthologised in *Seven Poets, The Second Tongue, The Flowering Tree, Young Commonwealth Poets '65, Poems from India, Sri Lanka and Malaya, Traveller's Literary Companion: South East Asia,* and *Westerly Looks to Asia*. His works have appeared in literary journals such as *Tenggara, Tumasek, South East Asian Review of English (SARE), Westerly, Manoa and World Literature Written in English* (*WLWE*).

MAQ: When and how did you start writing? Why did you decide to write poetry?

WPN: I'll answer your second question first. I don't remember ever having made any decision to write poetry. By this, I do not mean that poetry just came to me pouring itself out of the blue. Believe it or not, it started from my wanting very badly to write music. My contact with the Classical masters like Mozart and Beethoven when I was about 11 or 12 was an ecstatic one, and I felt I could try my hand at constructing something myself in sound. But then without the means to acquire anything beyond the ability to read and write simple musical notation and a rudimentary understanding of the grammar of chord progressions, I didn't get very much far. I didn't even have access to a piano to try out the sound of cadences, or a live teacher. To try out my pieces, I had only my brother to play them with me as violin duets. The next best thing then, I thought, was to create structures with words (words are also sounds). This was especially after hearing my Form IV (Standard Eight in those days) teacher expounding in worshipful tones on the imagery of poems like Matthew Arnold's "Sohrub and Rustam," which I thought was no big deal. So I began scribbling pieces which I naively thought were local adaptations of Keats and Shelley with the rhyme schemes faithfully adhered to. The eye opener to me was Edwin Thumboo's Rib of Earth. It opened my eyes to the possibility of writing Malaysian (then Malayan) verse seriously.

But as I have just said, I did not make a conscious decision to write poetry. Like smoking or drinking, writing grows into a habit after the first few tries. It became a habit like that with me. But don't conclude from this that I am only an aesthete. It was in the process of struggling to write that I began to think about and face up to (in terms of the psyche) the barren condition in which we Malaysians find ourselves. We are a disparate collection of peoples brought together from very different cultures by a colonial regime and are now just beginning to find our way towards being a nation. I have not tried my hand at fiction because I have neither the desire nor the talent for telling a story. As for drama, I must say that I am not comfortable with actors, my passion for Shakespeare notwithstanding.

I think I have largely answered your first question also. To be more explicit, I began writing when I was in Form Four. I didn't show any of my pieces to anyone other than sending a couple of them to pen pals in

Europe, not the UK mind you. I did not even have them published in the school magazine of which for a time I was one of the editors. In those days we were still colonial subjects and I felt very odd writing verse in English when our expatriate British teachers were not doing so. All English poetry was holy writ. How dare we Asiatics even think of adding to it. The rules of scansion and rhyme and other poetic devices were iron-clad. We could never get them correctly. "If you have not imbibed the language with your mother's milk, you will never have an ear for it, you see." That was the general attitude, until Rib of Earth.

MAQ: What, in your view, is the function of literature/poetry and the writer/poet in this era of K-economy and IT?

WPN: As far as I can tell, no one has ever, as a matter of general interest, questioned the philosopher or the footballer about his function or the usefulness of what he does. In the case of the philosopher, though, he may, in his first lecture to a beginning class in philosophy, ask his students what it is that they are going to be about if they ever go on to be professional philosophers. It seems to me that, literature (especially poetry) prompts questions about its function because we attach, or feel we ought to attach, significant value to it and yet cannot think of any practical application for it in "real life." So we have the school of "social relevance" among readers and writers who, to assuage an unconscious guilt about doing something so useless, confer social utility on literature of any kind, including poetry. Accordingly, literature is supposed to change society (for the better, presumably). Yet I have not heard of any dictator or military junta having been struck by remorse and so mend their ways as a result of having read a poem or even a 1,000-page novel.

While I do not agree with the "social relevance" school and its large social claims for literature and cannot think of any practical application for it (as we can, for instance, for the discoveries of mathematicians), I don't think that it is completely useless. I don't think that literature is merely made up of texts with indeterminate meaning and is thus on a par with grocery bills. I do not think that literature in something live. Whenever we "do" literature, whether as writers or readers, we engage with an activity that keeps us alive as subjects in touch with the sources of our feelings and imagination (and dreams) - in short, with the very roots of our being. We can say that it is in this way that we maintain our

balance, even our sanity, as we make our way in the world. A sure sign that literature is working for us in this is when we derive pleasure from reading it and feel great relief and exhilaration from completing a piece of writing. This is how I think literature works for people irrespective of whether they live in an agrarian, industrial or K-economy. The difference is not in the kind of economy the writers work in but in their preoccupations conditioned by it. Both Chaucer and the most avant-garde of poets to-day are workers of the inner life, but I don't think that Chaucer would ever have dreamed of celebrating type-writer and leaky bath tubs even if the equivalent of such objects existed in his time.

What I have said about literature and poetry applies to all creative arts in the widest sense of the term. This includes popular music, comics, posters, films and so on - anything at all that is created for pleasure. The difference between the so-called serious forms of art and popular art is only a difference of degree - in range, depth and subtlety. What matters is that a created artifact - by this term I include a poem - engages the emotions of people and paradoxically, by this, takes them out of themselves. This confers us a kind of freedom from a constant preoccupation with the self conscious of its existence in a body whose only concern is survival and propagation.

MAQ: You begin your latest volume, Against the Wilderness (2000), with a dedication to Rainer Maria Rilke, whose complex symbolic poetry is preoccupied with spiritual questioning about life and death. To what extent do you consider yourself a poet in the tradition of Rilke and who are the other major influences on you?

WPN: Actually, the primary fact about what I do is that I can lay no claim to any tradition. This I came to realise and accept gradually over the years of my writing. In cultural terms, the Malaysian psyche is a naked one. By this I mean that as a collection of peoples domiciled in a particular place and finding their way towards being a nation we do not yet have a common tradition. We clothe our nakedness in tatters stripped from mutually unrelated cultures to which we severally claim to be heirs but which are not ours as a single people. I have thus come to see my work as a progressive mapping of this unprotected state. That I write in English is one such sign that we really have little or nothing of our own. As a matter of fact, even if I write in Chinese, I am, in a sense, not using my language,

for I am taking it from another culture - of which I can no longer claim to have a part - whose realities are not those that I find myself in living in this country.

In taking over another culture's language i.e. English, I have to contend with the tradition in which it has found expression, learn from and, at the same time, struggle against its ways. I have no choice in the matter, but learn from poets like Shakespeare, Donne, Auden. I have to learn what they have done naturally in regard to the handling of syntax, line and sentence construction, rhythm, pitch, diction and so on. At the same time, I have to be wary of importing with what I learn of their underlying beliefs and philosophical assumptions about man and the world. This is so that I may realise in my own verse a movement and tone that is credible and appropriate to how I feel about the things I write about. The native English poets are in a sense exemplars but emphatically not ancestors. Though I have learnt from Rilke, as I have from other Germans like Trakl and Georg, I cannot say I am in their tradition. The same applies to poets like Crane, Stevens and Lowell among the Americans, and Slessor and Wright among the Australians, Baudelaire and Rimbaud among the French. In Chinese classical poets like Tao Qian, Du Fu and Li Bai I find a psychological counter-balance to Western influence and a great comfort. But even the Chinese poets cannot be claimed as ancestors.

MAQ: Is writing a spontaneous act for you, or is it a craft, that like any other craft, needs to be acquired by the poet?

WPN: Writing for me is very much a craft. I have had to go to school with many poets in more than one or two languages. In fact, I wish I could have also studied with the Russians and the Arabs. But there is one absolutely vital element in poetry (and all other creative arts) that has to be spontaneous. And that is emotion, and it is that which powers craft. It cannot be forced or faked. In my own practice, I begin a poem when I feel the emotion stirring and rely on craft teasing out the lines to bring the poem to light. This is what makes writing a poem so painful and at the same time so absorbing. The moment of completion of a poem is one of relief and exhilaration. That is the real reward in writing.

MAQ: Do you read contemporary Malay literature? Who are the writers in the language you admire?

WPN: I used to, when I taught myself enough Malay to read the extant writing, but I don't do much of it now. The writers who truly excite me are actually Indonesians - Chairil Anwar most of all. He was not afraid to learn from English, Dutch and German poets without fear of losing his identity. He seemed to have made the language into a powerful personal instrument for his poems. No one since has come close to using Bahasa Indonesia in the way he did. I find the early Rendra to be very rich in colour and imagery. He appears to have benefited much from his reading of the Andalusian poet Lorca. For the purity of the native line, there is no other poet like Amir Hamzah. Apart from these three, there are more than a dozen Indonesian poets worth reading and re-reading. I have to add, however, that Chairil Anwar and Amir Hamzah are not exactly contemporary, both having died in the nineteen forties.

The Malaysian writers I admire are also poets. These are Usman Awang for 20 or so very good poems, Latiff Mohidin, probably the best Malay poet writing, and Salleh Ben Joned who, because he does not fit the common mould of Malay poetry, is not appreciated by some of his fellow poets.

MAQ: In a recent commentary in The New Straits Times, on why Malaysia has not been able to produce a Nobel laureate in literature, Cecil Rajendra, a local English language writer, points out that Malaysian writers are too narrowly communal and lack a broadly humanistic outlook like that of great writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Pablo Neruda, and that they "lack testicular fortitude in speaking out and bearing witness to the times they live in [and] betray a similar lack of courage in experimenting with literary forms or testing their works against the best of their contemporaries." Expressing a similar opinion, especially in relation to Malay literature - that writes are too communally rooted "to explore the world outside their cocoon" and search for a national or human identity - Johan Jaafar, another local writer, concludes, "Malaysia will be best remembered for its Twin Towers, its highways or its orang utans, but not its writers." What is your view about the matter? How would you explain Malaysia's failure to produce a Nobel Prize winner in literature or a significant, world-class writer?

WPN: There are 189 countries which are members of the United Nations. How many of these countries have produced Nobel laureates

in literature? Of those which have, how many are Western countries? By Western countries, I include countries in the Caribbean, Latin America, South Africa and, of course, Australia and New Zealand. This leaves the number of non-Western countries to probably less than a handful. Of those laureates who come from non-Western countries, their work in a broad sense fit in or, at least, is not opposed to the Western agenda of liberal humanism, capitalism and free markets, idealism and individualism.

The question of "failure" in producing laureates should be better asked of China, which has so far produced one laureate who does not even live in the country; and of India whose famous laureate, Tagore, was associated with the circle of Yeats, who had a part in having the Prize conferred on him. China and India together have a combined population of 2.2 billion, accounting for one-third of mankind. They each have a great literary tradition going back three thousand years or more (in the case of India, probably more). The question may well be asked as to why these great nations have suddenly become so talentless as to have produced only two laureates out of 2.2 billion people. I would also ask, how many Russians have won the Prize since the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Why pick on little, not very important Malaysia?

Depth and range, literary quality and being prolific have a great deal to do with making a writer great, or in debased contemporary parlance, "world-class." But the fact of the matter is that unless the Western media pronounces somebody as world-class he or she is not world-class. But I have also to add that Malaysians have no cause to complain in this regard since we are a people who prize and pamper mediocrity. The fact that the question is asked, not just this once, about Malaysia's "failure" to win the Nobel Prize shows that many of us still buy into this Euro-centric attitude. Other than the Nobel, the Booker, Whitbread and such-like prizes are also of interest to us who are readers and writers, but I think we need not be overly exercised by the thought of their being so out of reach to Malaysians.

MAQ: Given the circumstances of the language in the country, why did you choose to write in English? Did your writing suffer as a consequence of the introduction of the National Language Act in 1967, which privileged Bahasa Malaysia as the country's national language and relegated English to a second/foreign language?

WPN: Writing in English for me and for others of my generation does not really involve a question of choice. That we write in English is something that was determined by the environment in which we grew up. For many Chinese families, especially those like mine of Peranakan origins, the father decided that the practical thing to do in regard to the education of children was to send them to an English school. We took to the language because we were educated in it. In my case, though, I did not learn the language till I was nine when I first went to school after the Japanese occupation. It was a lucky chance that the language was also one that, apart from its practical uses, opened up new intellectual worlds to us. It extended immeasurably the horizons of the narrow existence of culturally rootless families like mine. It is a language not to be easily given up.

My father (probably feeling guilty enough about loosing our roots) hedged his bets by sending us to Chinese schools as well in the afternoon. Chinese schools were vernacular schools. In those days "vernacular" implied something inferior. Being creatures of colonialism, we therefore did not take our Chinese schooling too seriously - to my regret. So here I am "stuck" with English. That it is English is, perhaps, not really a matter of much regret after all. But in the 1970s and 80s, the language situation created grave doubts for me about my writing. I felt then that perhaps writing in English, I would never be able to draw on the "authentic" life of this country. I questioned myself as to the legitimacy of my writing and I questioned myself into silence for quite a long while. These questions, for me, have as yet not been (and, I now realise, cannot be) fully settled. However, I have the choice of either going on asking myself unresolvable questions or just write. I decided to write.

MAQ: You are one of the very early writers in the English language in Malaysia. Could you recollect for us some of your experiences from the early days - how it all started? who else were writing around the period? what difficulties did you face for writing in an "alien" language?

WPN: I was at university in Singapore during the latter part of the 1950s. Those were still pre-independence years. There had already been students like Wang Gungwu, Beda Lim, Lim Thean Soo and so on, who started writing as early as 1949/1950, when Raffles College was conferred the status of a university as the University of Malaya. Despite this, local students who aspired to be poets or short story writers in English were

regarded as very strange birds indeed. It was unthinkable that we should create in the white man's tongue. Most of the teaching staff of the English Department were just indifferent to what we were about. One or two were in fact openly hostile. Things did not change even after the appearance of Edwin Thumboo's Rib of Earth, which showed that "natives" could succeed with the language. Ee Tiang Hong was also beginning to publish in book form.

As students we published solely (almost) in the journal of the Raffles Society, The New Cauldron, which was largely circulated within the campus. For a while there was also the literary paper, Write, published by Lloyd Fernando. We also managed to bring out several anthologies of verse. Looking back on it, I am surprised that we were able to realise enough cash from our sales and membership fees collected by the Raffles Society, to finance our activities. The fact that we named our journal The New Cauldron meant that we took ourselves seriously. The cauldron was to be our melting pot for the new culture for our multicultural nation to be. Although we wrote in English, we believed naively that we were to create a new national literature to come. So the writers experimented with forms to tame the English language to our use. The best remembered of such experiments was Engmalchin. This was to be a new language, made up of elements from English, Malay and Chinese, for Malayan and Singaporean creative usage. Needless to say, it didn't work.

Those of us who came later in the mid-fifties learned from the experiments of our predecessors. We wrote mainly verse and kept strictly to English. But in terms of models, we ventured further afiled than our predecessors. We scoured the university library for works by the Americans Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Marianne Moore and others. Robert Lowell was still unknown to us. We also discovered the French symbolists, principally Rimbaud and Baudelaire, largely through Eliot/Laforgue. The most exciting British poet then was Dylan Thomas. For "theory" we read The Well-Wrought Urn and Seven Types of Ambiguity, and Leavis. What we were trying to do was to find an idiom for poetry that would have the immediacy of our environment. In our group we had Oliver Seet, who wrote what were then considered the most successful poems, in terms of craftsmanship, of student poems. But he did not quite get out of the influence of Thomas. Tan Han Hoe wrote some marvellously obscure poems. Yet these poems can still be taken seriously as poetry today. Han Hoe stopped writing

after he left the university, while Oliver continued to write but did not bring himself to publish a collection in book form.

I myself was trying hard to find an idiom for my work but did not succeed while still at the university. Except for one or two pieces, my poems of that time were pretty bad and are best forgotten. But we had great fun, meeting at the Students' Union Canteen in between lecture and sometimes missing some, to read our poems to each other. Through sheer ignorance of what was involved, I did not find any problems with English because it was alien. It was later that I gradually realised that the problem was in the handling of the form, metre and rhyme. I had to work out my own approaches to them to avoid writing a false kind of English English poem.

MAQ: Whom do you write for? Do you necessarily have an audience in mind when you compose a poem or bring out a collection?

WPN: I don't write with any specific intent to address an audience. The process of writing takes up all my attention. Obviously I do need to have people read the poems. To my mind, these are people who have devoted time and effort to cultivate a love of poetry and developed the necessary reading skills. They need not be Malaysians, but could be people anywhere in the world. Such non-Malaysians would, to begin with, have to have an interest in the cultural agenda of writers writing from what is a small non-Western country of no great importance.

MAQ: What is your view of the present state of women in Malaysia? Do you think the circumstances of women have changed significantly after independence?

WPN: I really have not given much thought to this. In my own family life the position of women has never been a problem. In general, however, I think the circumstances of women in this country have improved since independence. Girls are given wider opportunities for education and there are more women in the Malaysian work force than before. Women are also making inroads into top management and administrative positions in both the private and public sectors. Moreover, most Malaysian families nowadays allow their daughters the freedom to choose their life partners. This certainly was not the case in the old days. Even Muslim

wives are given the right to refuse their husbands their consent to acquire second or subsequent wives. In terms of a fair share of the real power for decision making in both private and public life, the improvements notwithstanding, women have still a long way to go.

MAQ: How would the achievements of Malaysian Anglophone women writers compare to those of their male counterparts?

WPN: I wonder about the purpose of gender profiling of writers. Is it to develop data on the number of women writing and the volume of their work relative to men for use as evidence of the socially or naturally disadvantaged position of women? Or the evidence may be in what women write about men? If this is a feminist agenda, feminists must necessarily be trying to restrict women writers to within a narrow range of what they write about.

Malaysian women writers, in any case, can hold their own against their male counterparts. We have Shirley Lim, Beth Yap and Wong May (if we can still consider them as Malaysians) as examples of women writers who have produced work as good as if not better than that of men. After all, Shirley is the only Malaysian writer who has won a Commonwealth prize for a first book of poems. As an academic of standing in the US, she is better known than any of us. Counting by numbers alone, women writers are in no way behind the men.

MAQ: As you would know, Literature in English has recently been reintroduced in the Secondary school curriculum in Malaysia. Is this likely to affect the future of English language writing in the country, and who are the writers - both local and international - would you recommend for the syllabus?

WPN: How this is going to affect the future of English language writing in the country will depend on how the subject is taught. If the subject is taught in a slipshod half-hearted way by teachers not really qualified to teach the subject, the schools are not likely to produce students who will have a "feel" of how the language works and its spirit. Then we will not have our writers or even readers. As to the curriculum, it should include native British writers and Malaysians and Singaporeans. Any study of literature in English cannot neglect native British writers for they are the

first users of the language and they should be the best people to help non-natives gain an understanding of its idiom and inner life. It is perhaps not too much to ask that Shakespeare be reintroduced in schools? When I went to school, we had, as early as from Standard Seven (now Form Three), Shakespeare's plays like A Midsummer Night's Dream and Julius Caesar. In addition, the curriculum could include the shorter poems of Wordsworth and Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, and short stories like the Sherlock Holmes series. Malaysian and Singaporean writers included in the curriculum should be those who show how the language has been creatively appropriated for our own very different environment - in cultural and geographical terms. It would be invidious on my part to name specific Malaysian writers. So I will pass here. One or two African writers and West Indian writers could be included, but I am not sure if this stretches the curriculum too widely for secondary schools purposes. Translations of Malay texts should not be included on the reasonable ground that translators who are not good creative writers themselves are likely to produce offerings in lifeless, stereotypical kind of English and so defeat the whole purpose of teaching Literature in English in schools.

MAQ: Religion and mythology seem to be important elements in your work. Tell us a bit about the pantheon of your gods.

WPN: When I was very little, I spent hours listening to an elder brother, who converted to Catholicism, telling me stories about Jesus, the Last Supper and the Resurrection. I also heard about St. Peter and St. Paul and the great saints like the Spanish St. Teresa and St. John and his spiritual quest in "the dark night of the soul," and the two St. Francis, one of whom visited Malacca in the 16th century. I did not miss hearing also, of course, about the infamous Judas who betrayed Jesus. Hearing such stories fresh in childhood must have left something permanent in the unconscious. It made me into something of a perpetual novice hankering always to learn more about the life of the spirit and to feel the harsh constraints of the flesh. The figure Christ appears now and then though not always overtly in my work. When I came across the Osiris myth, I saw the parallel between the seasonal cycles of the temperate regions and the Resurrection and used the Egyptian god as a Christ figure. Osiris suited my purposes as I found I could make him into a god who failed in his resurrection to

symbolise our local condition. If such a god comes back at all, he is slightly demented as represented in the violent growth of our tropical vegetation. He is a transplanted temperate flowering shrub that grows thick and fat in green stems, sprouts thick, fat leaves but fails to flower. With Osiris, come some of the other deities of the ancient Egyptian pantheon.

In my early writing, I also made use of figures from Greek mythology. This was due to my subsequent reading at school of Greek myth and, of course, English literature, which is rich in allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. An English critic, it was Eric Mottram I think, said that it didn't seem right that I should incorporate a figure like Eurydice in my poems. Whether he is right or not is something that cannot be proved one way or another. What happened to universal truths? Anyway, I have moved from mythic figures (except for an occasional reference to a Hindu deity) to Malaysian human ones. I made third person references to them at first, then I addressed them (in one or two poems) and now I have them speak (actually think aloud) for themselves. As for the poems worked from classical Chinese, since they are not translations, their speaking voices are those of the Chinese poets themselves. I am now working on a short original sequence with a Chinese classical poet as the persona. As a Muslim, you will understand why I do not have any figures from Islam in my writing.

MAQ: Given the extent of intertextuality and infusion of personal elements in your poetry, what is the best way for readers to approach your work generally?

WPN: Actually, any reader who has a bare familiarity with the sacred literatures of the world and a knowledge of the English poetic tradition from Chaucer to the present day will find little difficulty with the poems. The clue to my image making lies in my reading of French Symbolists and early 20th Century German poetry. I read the poetry in these languages whenever I can lay hands on a parallel text or an English prose crib with commentaries. One can actually make sense of the poetry reading it in this way if one has invested some time in studying the grammar and sentence structures of these languages. Acquiring a taste for the music and visual arts of these countries and learning a little about their history will also help. The personal elements are a bit more difficult as they are drawn from family and local history. My poems are accessible

when they are read first as sentences for the literal meaning. Once the literal meaning is clear, the elements of imagery, line structure, rhythm and diction come together and are held as a whole by tone. I don't know how I can make this any clearer.

MAQ: In a recent interview with *The Straits Times*, Singapore, you emphasised the importance of reinventing the English language for the local context but rejected efforts at "Manglish" in the same breath, calling it "mangled English." Could you elaborate on this?

WPN: What I actually said was, "The (English) language has the tone of high cultural tradition associated with the Court, the professions, the universities, the English hierarchy and so on. I need to make this language over totally." This is not quite the same as "reinventing" the language, for "reinventing" implies giving the language new words and a new intonation and changing its rules of grammar and syntax. It is a physical makeover and as a deliberate act it produces an impossibility. If one succeeds in it, one ends up with a language for self-communication - which in itself is rather absurd. The changes brought about by "reinvention" can only come about by natural evolution over 500 to 1,000 years perhaps.

What I had in mind was that a non-native British poet using the language has to rid it of the historical and cultural associations and philosophical assumptions that the words can carry over with them. Other than poems deliberately composed in artificial demotic speech, serious English poetry generally has, until the late 20th Century, a tone that yearns towards the exalted. Even a very graphic poem on the horrors of war like Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," for example, depends on for its effect on words that bring up associations with high church rituals. I quote:

> What passing bells for these who died as cattle?
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns,
> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.

To bring out the pity over the death of young men thus wasted in war's slaughter, Owen has to rely on words like "doomed," "passing bell" (an

inter-textual reference to "Ode to the Nightingale"?) and "orisons" with their rich British and Christian associations to contrast with "cattle," "monstrous" and so on.

A Malaysian poet, even a Christian one, will strike wrong notes all the way if he tries to use words in this way. His lack of authentic British/English historical and cultural associations - even philosophical assumptions - will simply let him down. In my view, then, a Malaysian poet writing in English needs to remove the associations and assumptions that colour the language he appropriates for his own use so that he can make it take on a local hue as it were. Without this "making over" a genuine Malaysian voice will not emerge in the poems he writes. In the process, the poet has to be careful not to destroy idiom - which he should have absorbed from extensive and detailed reading of the poetry of the native tradition. I understand now why the poems I wrote while at school did not succeed. The English I wrote was fake English English. Those I wrote at university were pretty bad. In the effort to make the language "Malayan," I forgot about idiom. In my intoxication with Rimbaud, I didn't realise that effects (I don't mean poetic devices) possible in French could not be duplicated in English. It explained to me why surrealism has not really taken root in English poetry.

MAQ: Would it be appropriate to describe you a "displaced" poet writing from a diasporic consciousness and the sense of loss and absence in your poetry arising mainly from a sense of homelessness?

WPN: "Homelessness" may not exactly be the word to describe the condition in which I find myself. "Nakedness" (of the psyche) may be closer to the mark. I have often wondered, with some degree of anguish, what it would be like to have a tradition to work in, to have poets generations ahead as "ancestors." I have always wondered what it would be like not to have to be self-conscious about language, to function as a writer in an environment that has a full literary "infrastructure" comprising institutions that support reviews, criticisms, scholarly studies, public discussion and poetry reading and publishing. The lack of such an infrastructure may be considered a kind of deprivation.

MAQ: Do you ever consider not writing in English and try another language, say Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese?

WPN: It is too late in the day for me to think of changing language. English is the only language in which I have a decent sized vocabulary and menu of clause and phrase structures. I have "random access" to these for possible alternative words and ways of putting them together to say (as far as limitations of words would allow) exactly what I want to say. That I do not have the same facility for verbal combinations and permutations with Cantonese should put me in the category of the rootless. If I have a wish, it is to be able to compose in classical Chinese. It is a wonderfully concentrated language at which I could spend hours and days working on lines as a jeweller would on a gem. Unfortunately, the time for writing poems in classical Chinese has passed.

MAQ: There has been a lot of talk about the formation of a new collective national identity in Malaysia recently. What do you think is the best way for Malaysia to achieve that?

WPN: I do not think that national identity is something that should be planned. If you agree to this kind of planning, you are in effect saying that you consent to a small group of people taking upon themselves the authority to draw up a template in accordance with their personal ideas of what our national identity should be. They may resort to pet ideas about language, religion, culture or even ethnicity for drawing up their plan. You then let them, by varying degrees of coercion or inducement, make everyone fit into that template. I think people should be left alone. People should not be told what language to speak or write, what culture to adopt or what faith to practise. Malaysians left to themselves will, in time, evolve into a nation (i.e. Bangsa Malaysia). It may take 50 years or 100 years. All nations evolved in that way. The process cannot be forced.

MAQ: How do you see your poetry having changed in theme and/or style between early and later work?

WPN: On looking back on my writing over the years, I realise that I have had no other serious preoccupation as a writer than with exploring and putting into words the cultural condition in which we Malaysians find ourselves. This is a condition of cultural barrenness in the midst of plenty, the plenty being derived from the traditions of the metropolitan centres of the erstwhile colonial powers, and from those of the countries of

origin of many Malaysians. Many of my generation had been so thoroughly schooled in the former that we thought of these traditions as our own. Needless to say, we eventually had to see that we could hardly call Western culture our own notwithstanding that the world has long since been made-over in the image of the West. In regard to the great Asian traditions, our forebears had effectively severed their links with them as a source of creative life when they came here to serve as mere factors of production in a land that was attractive then only for its mines, plantations and entrepot trade.

Being schooled only in the English literary tradition by my teachers (the Tang poems I was "taught" in afternoon classes were pieces taken out of context for memorisation), I harboured secret ambitions to being a tropical variant of Wordsworth or Keats. As an aspiring "English" poet, technical correctness was of the utmost concern to me. I spent many hours, which should otherwise have been more fruitfully engaged in doing homework, worrying about rhyme, metre, verse forms and other things which aspiring poets are supposed to be thoroughly familiar with. I believe I wrote a few technically correct sonnets, which are now thankfully lost. But even then, I felt that even if I wrote verse that was technically correct, there was something about it that was not right. It took me quite some time before I began to realise that what I was doing had nothing whatsoever with life here. What I was doing was merely schoolroom practice in English versifying.

Without any models that I could find anywhere, I dared not think of writing verse in any other way than that shown me by the English poetry I studied at school. This was until I went to university in Singapore and found that the students there had been writing verse in ways I had not known before. There was free verse aplenty and there were experiments in mixing languages, up to three, in a single poem. Though most of the poems published in the student magazines were bad and not entirely free from Victorian mannerisms, they were a liberating influence. I lost my inhibitions that came from trying to be "correct" and "English," and threw overboard all the rules for "correct" versifying that I lived by. I went to non-English sources for help to find a way of writing. Rimbaud was then the most exciting find. My own sense of malaise and feeling of "unconnectedness" with my time and place drew me to him. But ultimately, his kind of experience was way beyond ordinary people like me. The poets to whom I went to look for a way to write were the European

poets of the early 20th century, the Expressionists and other forerunners of Dadaism and Surrealism.

Rightly or wrongly then, I took imagery to be the be all and end all of poetry, and concentrated primarily on imagery in writing poems. What I learned, in the process, was that in writing a poem in English, one had to proceed discursively, by "arguments" or "narrative" no matter how tenuous or obscure such "argument" or "narrative" might be. The poet could not write an effective poem by simply having one "autonomous" image generate another and another by a kind of free association. I did not realise that what I was doing was to work with "autonomous" images which were actually counters standing for preconceived elements in a discourse. So the poems I wrote at the time were pretty bad, as anyone interested enough to check them out at the National University of Singapore library can see.

It was when I was about to take my final exams that I wrote the few poems I still find acceptable today. These were highly personal poems in that they were inward looking and concerned largely with my feelings of unease without much "public" reference. I continued to write poems like these after I left the university and collected them as the sequence, "Nocturnes and Bagatelles." Without any conscious intent, I began to look to the landscape (of Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings) and local fauna and flora as sources of images as the outer manifestation of the inner condition of suffering cultural deprivation. The writing of the "landscape" poems led to the putting together of the sequence, "How the Hills Are Distant." Gradually I developed an elliptical and highly image-laden style structured in long, complex (in a syntactical sense) sentences. This style seemed to me to be a deference against entropy that could happen in a cultural void. I continued with this style in the writing of the sequence "For a Local Osiris," a god giving us no hope of resurrection. All this was in the 1960s. It was much later that I added to the sequence by having the god return in a monstrous and unexpected way.

It was during the 1960s that I discovered Robert Lowell and the Confessional Poets. At the same time I looked at the lives of my relatives and saw the failure of these lives in the crises they underwent when they sensed their impending end. There was the sensualist uncle who cried for the comfort of holding a woman on his deathbed, the grandmother who schemed to secure her place in her son-in-law's household on sensing the imminent death of her daughter, the cousin who died with his quarrels

over money unresolved and so on. These were the products, I thought, of a "culture" based solely on nothing else but an overriding concern over bodily survival. Taking the cue from the Lowell of Life Studies and after, I wrote the "death crisis" poems in a much plainer style. These were published in 1989 as part of the collection under the title, Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours. The poems were promptly mistaken for poems in rehearsal for dying. Though I thought that the style was appropriate to the subject matter, one or two readers were of the view that I had lost my poetic powers. But most others, reassuringly thought that the Grandma poems were an advance over Hills.

As I have just told you, I stopped writing over most of the 1970s and early 80s. Because of the language nationalism of the time, I had grave doubts about continuing to write in English. Later, when I started writing again, I worked on the poems for the Grandma collection. On completing these, I wrote "Mining Camp," a poem with a sick and dying miner as its persona. He was one in a party of tin miners who opened the tin fields in Ampang, which led to the establishment of Kuala Lumpur in the 19th century. Lloyd Fernando thought the poem was a new development. He probably sensed that increasingly I was going to write poems for personae other than my own, personae caught ruminating on their histories, which explain aspects of the social malaise of contemporary Malaysia. Perhaps he understood me more than he (or even I) realised. I went on to write the poems for the collection Against the Wilderness. The title sequence comprises twelve poems for ten speaking voices other than my own, which sums up an uncertain arrival five generations down from the Malaccan ancestors. I wrote these poems in 14-line "blank sonnets," a form that gives me control from writing more lines than are necessary. I have done that in some of my earlier poems.

Something that I have found very interesting is that the eight-line classical Chinese poem lends itself readily to being written as a 14-line poem in English. Chinese scholars will throw up their hands in horror at this, for they will say that it violates all the rules of Chinese poetics. True, but then translations made by these purists read like nothing if not "telegraphese," giving by their strict faithfulness to classical Chinese syntax and the fluidity in grammatical function of Chinese words, a totally and paradoxically false impression of what the original Chinese poems are like. I take the view that poems are untranslatable. A translation is not

a poem. A poem is not a translation. If a poem I have written has any link at all with a Chinese poem, it comes from my having used the Chinese poem as a source of reference for thought and imagery, and tone. The Chinese poem enables me to say something about a mode of existence not otherwise possible for me. As to translation, I cannot claim to have ever done the impossible. At best, all I can hope for is to have conveyed a suggestion of the original's tone and richness and splendour of the imagery, particularly if it is by one of the great Tang masters.

When I began writing 40 or more years ago, terms like "postmodernism" and "texts" as "sites" were unheard of. We were also not yet postcolonial. When I read the very different poems of poets under thirty (most if not all of them, sadly, are Singaporeans) I am sharply reminded of how far I have lived on into another age. It is right of course that young poets, though not necessarily postmodernist themselves, should write differently from poets of my generation. Yet on my part, I can hardly be true to myself if I adopt their style just to keep abreast of the age. It is indeed difficult for me to see how my poetry will develop in the future. Should I continue to write, I suppose the language of my poems will be old, and if it seems young, it will appear young only like shoots growing out of the stump of a very old tree cut down a great while ago. The great proviso is of course that I am capable of enough change to bring about that kind of writing.

MAQ: What is next for Wong Phui Nam? What are you working on now?

WPN: Nothing that is earth shattering. I am trying to start another collection, and also get the habit of writing 14-liners out of my system. I am still struggling with a minor sequence with a Song dynasty poet exiled to Hainan (then beyond the pale of the Empire) as the poem's persona. But the creative engines are firing too slowly for my liking.

Creative Writing

Himamaylan

Enchanting is the view
from the open sea
that rages like bronze
warriors heaping on a coast
sheltered from the sun
where an image of trees
blushes suddenly
at the loveliness
of wild flowers veiled
in mist and willow
hanging over silk parasols
a compression of sadness
that glides the summer haze
into a strip of stones
no longer washing
my seaside path
in the face of hot air.
Suddenly, a gallery of dust
drives me to return
to the open sea
leaping to a drift
of the blue sky
where clouds breathe
like evergreen leaves
beholding furrows
with their many peals
of glow and music.

Jose Capili

Palaca Grande

Floral emblems wither.
Instead, I shall see you
in this peacock webbed
in gold and green
strutting hues of brilliance,
a wheel of tail and quills
covered with spots smaller
than cobblestones flushed
with sand and pure coats
of tincture, forming this
folium of stems bearing
leaves of awe, closed
at both ends, enchanting
spring and shadow.

I shall remember you
like peacocks flushed
with the strangest sense
of wind chimes nourishing
this heart's saddest profile.

Jose Capili

In Kanlaon

We listen to the rustle of leaves
behaving like music recomposed
to achieve inner glow and rhythm.
Into the ruins of an old hut,
we sit on a ledge observing
the turn and flow of stones
we perceived from childhood
as walls, doors and ceilings.
We scale the trail of bridal veils,
the landscape of cones
falling on mountain sleeves,
a musician's awakening
from the rhythm of green
leaves and lowland rivers,
pure hemp and other bell-shaped
things rising from
a sudden gush of the wind.
Because these memories
blur easily, we erect words
heavily cut in stone,
also to remember how our ancestors
once cleansed our bloodlines with
the safekeeping of knives,
platters and spears illuminating
the calligraphy of light
descending from heaven.

We resolve to savor gladness
brought about by the late afternoon rain,
petals from every grain and marmalade,
weathercocks reverberating each pillow,
this homecoming filling up
the swell in our eyes.
We uncover Kanlaon's great shivering
gratefully reconsidering swivels
of faith and home in its fringes.

Jose Capili

In Silay

El Ideal's tartlets twinkle
from the perceptions
of a sugarcane worker's child
who weeps because other kids
can take their own sweet time
inside the food chamber.
So the child clings to his vineyard
of stones and shingles
where he learns to spin up
flour, chocolate and sugar
acquired from memory.
After all, the mountains of Negros
stay fresh and green.
The birds of Kanlaon
warble between daily
spells of rain.
The waters of Balaring
can overwhelm easily
an evening's howling tempest.
In this hometown
where a breadth of sugar farms,
stone churches and ancestral
houses once existed
it takes great effort for
any sugarcane worker's child
to convey refinement.
Parasols of the old rich
illumine one's pert and skin.
The sun inflicts its rage
only for the little child's sheen.

Jose Capili

Sipalay

Apparitions from the sea
encircle the ripening
of seasonal plums.

Along Balubadian Point,
a fishwife's twitter constantly
reminds the town
how larks must have intoned
the music of amazement.

Swimmers unfurl their mats
under mahogany-like
trees genuflecting before
the coastline's coolness.

Schools of shrimps and fishes
from the nearby stream
inspire birds to graze
an inscription replicating
the scene with clusters
of palmeras beneath
the light-bearing moon.

Women from the hills bend
summer time when
they navigate Cartagena
to buy noodles,
rice and firewood
with the movement
of trains bearing sugarcanes.

When Sipalay unfolds a breeze,
the blueness of the sea
recedes into a conjecture.
Blossoms adhere to their sway
and the evening mist descends
to gloriously take over.

Jose Capili

Matriarch

My grandauntie says we are *nyonya* from the north,
not quite malayan, not quite burmese, not quite anything.
She says her mother trudged the earth from
Rangoon to Penang—hardy feet that must *speak resilience*
in the soul.

I think a secret music must have stirred her, and
imagined dances beneath the green drew her will southwards.
Perhaps pearls filled her dreams, and her brother's, perhaps
the sea whispers were too vital to resist. Perhaps
in the speech of the leaves she passed, she
heard her destiny spoken of, so far away from home.

My grandauntie says we're chinese after all;
though her mother dressed differently, she married
great-grandfather still. Second wife, but very nice,
giving him so many sons. And when he died,
staying widowed—though she must have been a looker,
being proposed to in her weeds.

Intrepid traveller, reduced to poverty, what was
my great-grandmother like? I want to think a little
of her would have rubbed off on me, some
disposition for independence and for guts. But I am
generations removed from the flower of the north,
the sharp and tangy fragrance of her life—too much
sunk into the soil, too easy and secure to risk ....

Grandauntie must know that we are chinese anyway,
though we play *bangsawan* to the swaying palm.
We are *nyonya* from the north.
We ate the seeds springing from the land,
and turning one day to the south, headed for the
lingering dream.

Wong Ming Yook

Pengkalan Chepa, Kota Bharu

The casuarinas blew in the sea wind,
their tall heads nodding beauty in the piny leaves.
I picked up cones and brown needles when young,
and wandered in this beauty. So satisfied with their
hum and haw, approving me as I ran in-between their
brown trunks, so satisfied was I, in this guardian grove.

The sea-wind blew sea shells among the cones,
reminder that this sandy land was once reclaimed
by watery salts. It told tales, salted and winded over
years, and gave me to believe that this was paradise. I once
lived in this expanse, this receding sea, and played among
the idyllic leaves and trees and shells and wind; unafraid
even of silver streaky snakes that whisked their tails into
the undergrowth. I was unafraid.

In this beauty, at once a green and sandy stretch, I saw
the rain, arching its happy bow across a sky, untainted
and white. I heard the sea waves from too long ago, still
calling out to its lost loves. I breathed in the salt wind and
played in its lines. I flew kites my cousin made from bamboo
and white paper – I thought him clever – kites which
caught the sleepy heads of tall, green casuarinas. They made me laugh,
wearing kites about their ears.

In this beauty, I once ran; underneath the rain, or sun,
or cloud, mornings heavy with white mist, like fog, I
lived. Cleaning rains came and went; at night, the wind
unconsoled, wailed; I heard the cries of the outside through
my high windows, and slept to their wild lullaby. In this
country, I was a child. The rains washed me and the winds
dried my hair; I ran in-between the loving trunks in the
guardian grove. So satisfied was I. So satisfied was I.

Wong Ming Yook

In Malacca

In Malacca, I grew up, hating every moment of my stay. Narrow streets, narrower minds, it seemed constriction ordered my days. I hated the flatness, the plains, the drab paddy fields; my mind was used to contoured variety. I only liked the red dutch buildings, the weird Portuguese fortress. I liked the chapels and the graves, I liked the seawalls and the seacalls that I could hear from my convent classroom windows – stained glass pretty.

At recess, we used to feed the catfish and watch the waves break on the walls; such a thin line of concrete that separated us from infinity. And then the prefects would come and chase us away; the nuns said it was dangerous too close to the wall. What were they afraid of, as if we didn't know.

I liked the chapel, so serene, and once went in to pray over somebody who had died; who knows who. Good little convent brat I was, brain filled with old world Malacca and images of saints and stigmata. I loved my class, I loved my friends, I loved my teacher, inspirer of my world; at eleven, only geography held great pain and agony. I loved the nuns, aspired to please them, and dreaded them, they were so unfair. Resonances of their air and voices still creep over me, unaware, and straight shoots my back- "No slumping, please!" oh, rosemary's indeed for remembrance. They were rosemarys to me. Sweet rosemarys, sweet dedication in their smiles (and rulers in their hands).

So much to love and hate, to secure and to lose, it seems
Malacca held me more than I then knew; loving its old smells,
its quaintness and dirt; and hating with passion its unforgiving
narrowness. I never go back; it's too much of an experiment in
living. Malacca's just a word now to me, good enough to be
a tourist in, but never to live in, I think. And hearing of it is
quite enough, to throw me, or to make me laugh.

At eleven, Malacca was the world. Vasco da Gama thought so, as did the
others who came and went. And I thought so, though the
world puzzled and hurt. I longed for another, while inhabiting
this, and felt that if I were a traveller, I would travel on.

Sweet rosemary's for remembrance, and memory's a hardy thing;
sift tragedy from monotony, and Malacca recedes, until the rose
gardened thought wakes itself, and calls to mind the seawalls, seacalls,
the chapels and the graves; no slumping, please, look at the fortress,
the catfish bite, the wall breaks, and the seas rush in ...

Until the gardened thought, Malacca is safe.

Wong Ming Yook

Amyl after Midnight

"memories seep through my veins"
Sarah McClachlan

by Leonard Jeyam

i. Suneetha

Remembered anger
rarely filters through
to the following morning
from the night before.

It's a narrative
that has lost its key idea
that suddenly
falters,

leaving behind
a few damaged words
or phrases,
and a lost mind.

That mind is mine today,
having heard you tell
about those unspeakable
things you had done

to us in the past.
I-Wei had never heard
you talk like that -
most of us hadn't.

No one else but you
could extrude such fiction
from the truth and
no one else, I think,

was born so naturally evil.
The end of your words
brought only pain and anger.
Only one remains.

ii. Damien

I never believed anyone could down
a jug of Long Island Tea like you.
Only at the club I would see
those scene-queens do their muscle-
hustle with their heads swaying

from side to side entranced,
their bodies glistening with sweat,
as if cooling down after a forest
deep inside had been set ablaze.
I drank like them that night

and felt no fire within
but only an insensible dream
of misdirected love
that kept playing and playing
before my closing eyelids.

I never saw what really happened;
I only heard Jien tell me
about I-Wei crying through the night.
It was many years later that she
finally mentioned your name,

but by then it was too late.
I'd waited and waited till one day
that incandescent glow
I'd always felt within
began to burn and burn

like the haze of a Sumatran
forest fire that can be seen for
thousands of miles around
but never the fire itself.
It hasn't stopped since.

iii. Ashwin

I never knew at first
what it was that you all sniffed
during those evenings at your home
and sometimes to the beat
of that house music we all liked.

My first sniff told me for the first time
that even the darkness outside
could be as benign as a memory
that keeps betraying you
night after night.

And then you told me how
it'd help Jien and me loosen more
than ourselves – so now, with each
sniff of anticipated oblivion,
a million brain cells mutate each time

they sense your arrival, even in mere memory,
into something as uncontainable as you.
But like some karmic contradiction
they vanish every time like a whiff
of amyl after midnight.

iv. I-Wei

The smell of coffee grounds in the morning
has always reminded me of you,
and that morning after we broke up.

I have never loved again:
even walking down the aisle with Damien
that December morning I could only think of you.

I felt like some arty Taiwanese video,
feeling condemned like a newlywed ghost
having to run forever after

my wedding limousine in my bridal dress
and after you as a young boy
leaving home for the first time.

You could never have guessed how I felt;
Damien never knew about our addictions of the heart.
And something inside him burns stronger by the day.

I rarely think of you these days.
You're like some sputum at the tip of my tongue.
I've read it's strong enough to kill a bird.

v. Chris

Between vision and revulsion
last night's dream returns
with the glaze of guilt
stripping itself from the hurt,

the hurt at the edge
of a happiness unuttered
that is so virile that the line
love me once again

comes out distressing,
rather than clarifying,
that even liquid E
with vodka feebly

unravels the tangle
of such inchoate desires,
these desperate fires
of the mind.

vi. Nadia

I remember a Star Trek episode when
Dr Crusher was trapped in some kind
of thought-bubble of her own making –
her universe went no further than beyond
the Enterprise and a mist-like shield
a few hundred metres around.

I've always imagined purgatory
to be like that, trapped in a space bubble
no larger than our own imagination;
and to go beyond it we had to go beyond
the representations of our own ideas
of space and time and logic.

That is how I feel at this very moment.
I've created this warp bubble; the palings
of its reality are set within a personal hell,
with hardly a stable threshold in sight.
And extrapolating to get out has been so trying
and so tedious these last few years.

vii. Jien

You once told me
you knew the meaning of life.
When I asked you what it was
you said it was like a Mary Black song,
touching lyrics and an achingly beautiful melody,
and a human voice conflating the two.

I heard her again the other day.
I blew some ten-year-old dust
out of those vinyl grooves and I cleaned
the stylus and toed in the speakers
just the way you used to do it,
sitting directly in front of them.

Her tune was familiar,
haunting like before,
but her lyrics I now fail to remember,
those that I once believed
echoed real things about real life.
I don't hear them anymore.

ix. Edward

I once had a lecturer
who categorised the essences
of people into three:
prose, drama, and poetry.

You, I dare say, were a poem.
You were the only person I knew
who could transmute guilt
into something poetic

that by the final stanza
it would gleam
(and with such hubris too)
in a radiant realm,

half mysterious,
and only half understood.
You are like that arrow
brushing aside the suicidal dew,

finally piercing the sun,
trembling, in the infernal gold.
You are the insolence of Plath
and her inviolable vision combined.

x. Adam

These days go unremembered.
They reside in some small, obscure recess,
never wanting to be known, so unlike

the commination of our inner demons
in the past and those twisted mental games
I used to tailor to my imagination.

Would you believe me if I told you
I have found peace at last?
It's a peace so unlike my early,

uncontextualised life when
I was forced to *exaggerate to exist*
through body and tongue

and sometimes from bar stool
to bar stool ambling through
every cocktail party joke I knew.

Sometimes, after the rain has
stopped falling all night on this island,
the land emerges like some translucent world,

shimmering, undulating, then steadying
just beyond the mind's eye in that space
just before thoughts are awakened.

These days I can see right through
the transparent blue of the sea
and those different hues

I once thought suggested depth:
those tiny schools of fish
don't cry out in pain anymore.

These days they sing
of the sublime, surprising even
the suntanned boys

who gather on the beach
on humid nights, lulling them,
with the superfluous wind, to sleep.

The King of the Sea

by Dina Zaman

Hani, Zani's oldest sister, ran up to their neighbour's wooden blue house, to ask them to pray for their father.

"He might be going soon, please pray and if you see Awang, here are the keys," then she ran back to their brown weather beaten home in time to see their father die.

Hardly had the afternoon passed when a small funeral procession appeared on the dusty road. Kamel, the eldest brother led the procession, his witch-wife by him, smiling for now they would rule the household. Zani's other siblings — Hana and Ima — were crying while Mother and the youngest, Little One, walked stoically behind the group.

They passed the sundry store and turned left at the arthritic coconut tree at the end of the road. The procession then turned right to pass a deserted house, its door and shutters flapping in the wind, inspiring a shiver in those carrying the dead man, and walked towards the smell of a jasmine orchard, where the cemetery was.

All the men in the village prayed in the surau for the deceased's soul, for he had been a good and hard-working man. The women stayed in their homes, as they had to run households, which would not change because of a neighbour's death. A few wished their husbands were dead, while another group were gleeful at the misfortune and many more were sorrowful but quiet in their sympathies. After the prayers, the men left to go back to their work and families.

A week after their father died, Zani and Hana went for a stroll by the beach. They both agreed that their little village, Buai, was beautiful in the evenings. The day's mist had cleared and anyone walking on the beach would see the sister islands – Gemia and Kapas – all lush and green, with the diamond blue ocean beckoning them. The sea curled up at their feet, leaving behind sparkling gifts of shells between their toes.

Hana sat down on the sand, tired by the walk and the funeral's aftermath. Zani went on.

He detoured to wade into the cool water. Colourful tiny fish darted away from his splashing strides, and tiny jellyfish nibbled at his leg hair. He brushed them away with his hand. He loved feeling the wet laps against his feet, and as he went deeper into the sea, his ankles and thighs. He turned around to wave at his sister. She was as big as a butterfly. He dipped his hands into the seawater and washed his face, feeling the sand and salt grazing his skin. He cleared his eyes of stray salt with his finger and, as he blinked and squinted, a man emerged from the sea.

First the man's head appeared to be bobbing up and about, following the waves' movement. Then Zani saw his neck. Slowly as each wave charged at the beach, the man and his torso slowly materialised.

"Father!"

The man turned.

Zani ran as fast as he could in the restraining sea, calling "Father! Father!" and hugged him as soon as he reached the man. In his excitement, he slipped into the water and, thrashing his way up, he held his father's legs.

"Yes?" asked the man calmly.

"Father! You're back!"

"But I've always been here."

"Oh we know that, you're always with us, but you're really here! Wait until everyone hears about this. You're back just like how Mother said you would!"

The man stared at him.

"I'm not your father."

"What? Father, stop joking. Tell me, how did you get back? Did you crawl out of the grave and come here for a quick wash? Father, why did you pull that trick on us, pretending to be dead?"

The man looked at Zani even harder. His brown face had a sheen of green on it, reflecting the late afternoon sun. He began to swim away.

"Father!" He managed to grab his father's arm.

"If you don't stop shouting, the fish will run away."

"Ha, ha, Father you are joking too much. Look, Hana is waiting for us. There! Let's go home now!" He tugged at the man's hand and pointed at his sister's direction.

Hana had become an inch-long dot against a backdrop of cream.

"I think you have me confused with someone else," the man said gently.

"Father."

The man's eyes turned green. Zani saw and was startled. He stared, and then the man's eyes were brown again, just like Father's eyes.

"Your father is dead?"

"Yes. No." Zani was confused.

"Why do you think I am him?"

"You look like him, you sound like him, you smell like him and you are here. Father fished here. Come Father stop this game," he pleaded.

The man was unmoved. Zani refused to allow him to go. He threw a tantrum in the sea, threatening the man with the dissolution of his family. His daughter-in-law was practising black magic in the house. Their mother was heartbroken and his sisters were running wild. His brothers refused to work. Please come home Father, he begged.

"Why does the eldest refuse to work?"

"Because your daughter-in-law has cast a spell on him."

"I can't help you."

Zani screamed. His shout was so loud it scattered landing seagulls.

Thwack! His father had slapped him.

"You really are scaring the fish. And I am not your father!"

"Can't you pretend then, please?"

The sea became still. And the gulls stopped talking. High tide arrived. Zani noted, soon it would be time to go before the South China Sea ate them up.

Later when they got home, Hana would tell him she saw him talking to someone. From where she stood, he could have been anyone. But the build, the gestures, they belonged to their father. She shook her head as she recounted the incident to him. Sorrow made one imagine ghosts.

The man looked at the darkening skies. The sea had begun whispering again.

"Tell your mother I love her. Tell your brother to divorce his wife. Tell the other to be a man. And tell your sisters, I am watching them."

"And me?"

"I am the king of the sea."

He dived into the water, and soon Zani saw him swimming, just as his father swam once, bold arm strokes and weak legs, right to the edge of the world.

Clearly Breathing Once Again: The State of Malaysian Literature in English

by Andrew Ng Hock Soon

MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: A CRITICAL READER. By Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks (eds). Petaling Jaya: Pearson Education Malaysia, 2001. 338pp (paper).

I would like to begin by meditating on Homi Bhabha's description of "the people" and relate it to the idea of the writer and the critic. In his now classic essay, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation", Bhabha postulates that:

> The people are neither the beginning or the end of the national narrative; they represent the cutting edge between the totalising powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to the contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population.[i]

What I understand Bhabha to mean is that the idea of nationhood is constantly being recast and modified by the very subjects which this idea is attempting to subjugate through a kind of all-consuming hegemony. 'The people' are the conduit between 'the totalising powers' and the 'contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population', constantly negotiating between the two to redefine and reshape the boundaries - both physical and psychical - of the modern nation. If nationhood is a kind of narrative, a view which Bhabha upholds, then the people are its most important readers. Bhabha qualifies his argument by elaborating on the way the people must be thought to realise that they are simultaneously products of their national history (that is, they are "the historical 'objects' of a national pedagogy"[ii]) and subjects of their own nation's present and future destinies through the process of resignifying, repeating and (or) reproducing the past. This is decidedly a difficult position to "be" because national ideologies are sometimes difficult to dismantle, and the dangers or ideological false consciousness are ever present. And sometimes, astute readers of the narrative of nationhood find themselves in a tight spot because the ability to critically assess their nation is

unequally yoked with powerlessness due to occupying the position of the marginal. In fact, it is often the case that the best critics of the narrative of the nation are the peripheral subjects, who, from their (disad)vantage point, have abler perceptions but who also experience more acutely that sense of hopelessness and despair for the kind of positive transformations needed to (re)create the nation. And if a marginal reader of the narrative of nationhood is also a writer, the difficulty becomes most intense. For how can one consolidate one's spatial and historical rooted-ness with the hostile hegemony that prevails and which cripples one's imaginative capacity to rethink, and indirectly, refashion the self? To be more precise, how can a writer love her country and people when certain national grand-narratives are generally indifferent of or antagonistic towards her and her work?

This is one of the main issues which seems to preoccupy many of the essays in Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wick's collection of critical essays on Malaysian literature in English. Simply entitled *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, this collection comprises thirty-four essays written over a period of approximately 30 years by prominent literary critics and writers from Malaysia. The essays are further divided into four main sections. The first section discusses the problem of defining (in both the sense of giving meaning and giving shape to) a national literature in English. The second section deals with the state of writing within three major literary genres, namely fiction, poetry and drama. The third and shortest section is represented by essays on general literary criticism on some of the important themes in Malaysian writings such as migration (diaspora), religion and sexuality. The last (and longest section) are essays on individual Malaysian authors who write in English such as Lloyd Fernando (fiction), Lee Kok Liang (fiction), Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam (poetry), Shirley Lim (fiction and poetry), K.S. Maniam (fiction and drama) and Kee Thuan Chye (fiction, poetry and drama).

All of these writers have struggled to negotiate their ethnicity and their position as subjects of a nation in their writings. What is amazing about these writers, as attested by several of the essays in the anthology, is the incredible fertility of their writings in terms of ideas and the imagination to find ways to transcend political and social inhibitions which govern national literature. As some of the essays point out, due to the political unrest of 13 May 1969, the emphasis on national peace and unity took on paranoiac proportions, and one of its consequences was the ele-

vation of Bahasa Malaysia as both the national language as well as the language for national literature, relegating literatures in other languages (Tamil, Mandarin and English) to the class of sectional literature, or worse "aimless literature" (*Sastera Kehilangan*)[iii]. Hence, writers from that time onwards who persist in writing such 'sectarian literatures' must face two major difficulties: the need to write about sensitive issues without attracting or violating the hegemonic set-up, and finding readers. If Anglophone Malaysian writers have been more or less successful in the first instance, they face an uphill struggle in the second. Hampered by national ideologies and the lack of an audience, several of these writers have chosen to abandon their country of origin – at least in terms of their status as "citizens" – in order to find new, more fertile grounds for their writings to flourish and the possibility of gaining a new audience. Shirley Lim, for example, is now an American, whilst Ee Tiang Hong passed away while living in Australia. Yet, as Koh Tai Ann in her essay has demonstrated, the two writers continue to have a very strong sense of belonging to their nation of origin and that their writings still reflect a nostalgia for the land which they left behind. According to Koh, they "cannot escape the fact that writers in general are defined more by their nationality than their ethnicity and individuality ...", [iv] an idea which is debatable but certainly provocative and seems to define the work of these two Malaysian writers in diaspora. Indeed, this view is attested to by Shirley Lim herself in her essay "Tongue and Roots: Language in Exile". Here, she declares that:

> As for me, choosing to make my future with the language I love, I find of course, that language is never enough. The whole of a person is of sights, sounds, smells, motions, tastes, a community of sensations we call country. The naming is in English, but now the objects for naming are no longer at hand, I do not wish to be in exile. To remain faithful to my origins, I must be unfaithful to my present. To be constant to my Malaysian identity, I must continue in the United States to be a stranger in a strange land. [v]

For Lim (and Ee Tiang Hong), in order to be identified with one's nation, one must be in exile so as to be able to detach oneself so as to, firstly, understand one's nation objectively, and, secondly to leave a "psychic" gap in one's subjectivity which is then compensated with writing as nostalgia. The latter serves the important purpose of re-imagining one's past

and history not in order to falsify the self of the past but to reinterpret (and hence, reinvent) that self in history. As Fiona Allan argues:

> The retrieval of the past through expressions of loss and yearning are perhaps, then, not merely instances of conservative nostalgia intent on recuperating an imaginary, illusory past. They also enable a critique of the very forces which produced the conditions of loss in the first place. Nostalgia has the potential to be reclaimed as a positive site of un-forgetting and of negotiating the future. [vii]

Reiterating nostalgia, then, becomes a form of self-empowerment that propels the subject towards a future that is based on a negotiation with the past. If the nation's past has not been conducive in shaping the writer and her work, then a re-interpretation of the self in history must be undertaken in order for her to overcome that sense of despair and frustration so that her work inherits a fresh lease of life. This may sound tritely optimistic, but as evidenced in some of Lim's poems, this may be the only way for a writer to not lose hope in her nation and to reclaim something of value and importance from one's country (be they merely remembered sense perceptions like smells and tastes) for the self [viii].

Being a country once colonised by the British also poses another difficult dilemma for many of these writers. English is, after all, the language of the colonial master, and to write in it is, to an extent, a confirmation that one is still not freed from this colonised past. If British Imperialism no longer subjugates its colonized others in a geographical and political sense, it continues to do so through language. Hence, postcolonial writers, such as those in Malaysia, must find ways to appropriate English without losing the essentiality of their own unique culture and place. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* put it:

Strategies of appropriation, then, seize the language, re-place it in a specific cultural location, and yet maintain the integrity of that Otherness, which historically has been employed to keep the post-colonial at the margins of power, of 'authenticity', and even of reality itself [viii].

Appropriation, then, means to re-localise the English language so as to represent peoples and cultures which were once deemed as "Other" by the colonial masters; more importantly, this appropriation is a strategy of using the master's tool against him. If the English language was once used to subjugate the other by preventing them from having a voice (for

the colonized were largely refused the privilege of the dominant language, and if one could learn it, one should also adopt the attitude of a grateful native), now, a new breed of writers who were educated in English must learn to negotiate their identification with the language without identifying with their master. A different problem, but one relating to the difficulty of writing in English, is also posed before these writers: the need to break away from the concept of Canon and to write works that are expressively Malaysian. Writers in the English language are most often also students of English literature, and Western concepts, metaphors and images haunt the work of these writers who must be constantly on their guard against them. As Dudley De Souza's essay shows, early Malaysian writers in English sometimes encountered this pitfall. For example, a line by an early poet, Wang Gungwu, it reads: "O Queen of palms, the Moon envies Thy stately majesty". De Souza demonstrates that apart from the 'palms' nothing in this line is authentically Malaysian, but apes Western techniques of writing [ix]. Over time, however, Malaysian writers indeed became more sensitive to this consternation, as evidenced by writers like Edwin Thumboo, Wong Phui Nam and Ee Tiang Hong, whose poems capture a localness in most original and arresting ways.

But if creative writing has achieved this measure of originality and authenticity, Malaysian literary criticism continues to wrestle with the consternation of de-colonising the spectre of the colonial master. I believe that the colonial ghost in literary criticism would be much harder to exorcise simply because the study of literary criticism is powerfully entrenched in English tradition and education, and to practise it would require a certain amount of identification with this said tradition. Hence, as much as a literary critic would wish to argue for the need for a national literature in English, comparisons with, and dependence on, English literature is inescapable. One of the most interesting essay in the collection is Lloyd Fernando's 1969 piece entitled "English, Literature and Bilingualism in South East Asia". This essay is sometimes contradictory, but I suspect it is not wholly the fault of the writer. Since deconstruction theory and psychoanalysis, there is now the awareness that texts can have an "unconscious", in that the trace of what is repressed in writing can often be detected through careful reading of what is actually set down in print[x]. This, in my view, is the case with Fernando's essay. As much as he is advocating the need for South East Asian literature in English, viewing English as a language that can bring peoples together, there is a strong

tendency towards glorifying the English (their culture and literature) and Western success which the text cannot escape. Posing as a sort of spokesman for Asians, Fernando decries the lack of interest by Asians in their own "traditions of belief, habit, custom, and even language", claiming that instead, Asians are developing their "personality, society and life along models perfected in the West".[xi] He blames technology and the media as the two main and subtle means of Western re-colonisation of the 'untrained' Asian minds. Asians, according to Fernando again, have become influenced by the medium as the message - "In the pauses between killing ourselves, indeed even while killing ourselves, we are truly hooked on the media"[xii]- a view which certainly reminds us of Baudrillard's apocalyptic view of the world as completely identified with images to the extent that bodies and selves are subsumed by them altogether. But as Douglas Kellner and Steven Best have pointed out, Baudrillard's mistake is essentially his lack of respect of the media audience:

> Baudrillard's evisceration of the subject precludes analysis of the responsibilities and ability of subjects to collectively transform the present social structures and relations of production.[xiii]

Likewise, Fernando's rather condescending view of the Asian media audience fails to consider that audiences are made up of responsible and intelligent readers who are able to critique and interrogate what they view. They may be "untrained" (another rather patronising term hoisted onto the audience) [xiv], but they are certainly not negligent or uninformed. Of course, it must be recalled that this essay is written in the late 60s; in light of voluminous studies of the media audience and fandom in the disciplines of Cultural Studies and Popular Culture, Fernando's views are certainly outdated today. This however, does not preclude the fact that the text makes a very interesting read, if only for the tension between rejecting Western influence and the inability to extricate oneself from Western ideas and supposed superiority in a textual play of what American critic Harold Bloom would call an "anxiety of influence".[xv] Indeed, the essay makes constant references to Western writers(Pound, Kafka, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Conrad, Swift, Sterne) and philosophers (A.J. Ayer, Chomsky, Benjamin Lee Whorf) and their works, often using them to read against the Asian lack of integrity, and evidencing their gullibility. This is all ultimately ironic, because one of the main thrust in the essay is an exhortation to:

> absorb what is best in the specifically British literary tradition and make it undergo a sea-change, if you like, in closer harmony with our own ways of living. It is rather certain Western habits of thinking which are now deeply infused into the language to which we must be much more alert. This is a challenge which specialists in all branches of learning using the English language in Asia face, not just teachers of literature. And if we do not continue to nurture in many of our students and teachers the highest skill and understanding in the use of the English language, and that means the study of English literature, we will certainly fall prey to more subtle and paralysing forms of Western domination.[xvi]

Not only does Fernando's essay on the whole fail to adhere to this exhortation, this very passage itself is already embedded with ideological bias in the form of an unconscious text. For it is clear that the writer privileges English literature (as the "highest skill and understanding" in the study of English), and it is English literature that is most powerfully "infused" with "certain Western habits". Fernando's essay, as I have attempted to show, is itself a "prey to the more subtle and paralysing forms of Western domination"; for literature, often hailed as work which captures and describes the "human experience" is not without its racial and prejudicial colours which are often missed if one is not alert enough to detect their undertones. English literature until the latter part of the twentieth century is largely not about the "human" experience, but the interest of a specific, dominant group, and which often marginalizes and/or demonises otherness. Fernando's essay, that is, an essay written by an Asian, ironically exemplifies what Edward Said would define as "Orientalism", in that the point of view has strong Western prejudices in its perception of the East (that Asians are generally untrained, unaware and easily influenced by the West, which is also an implicit declaration that the West is certainly smarter and better to be able to so successfully dupe it Eastern neighbours). I have analysed Lloyd Fernando's essay somewhat in detail not because I judge the essay to be lacking in integrity and critical strength. I choose it because of the way it exemplifies so many aspects of the technologies of authorship and writing, some of which go unnoticed even by the author himself. I choose it also because it clarifies what I am arguing concerning the difficulty encountered by Malaysian writers in English (whether literature or criticism) to detach themselves from their identification with

what the English language inheres politically, traditionally, socially, historically and authoritatively. On a different level, another difficulty besets Malaysian writers in English, one which, however, is not encountered by Malaysian writers in other (non Malay) languages. This is due to the fact that when one writes in Tamil or Tionghua, one is writing for a specific group of readers who are defined by their ethnicity. The English language, which is not the mother tongue of any of the ethnic groups in Malaysia, but which is certainly spoken and understood by a vast majority, faces the problem of finding common grounds in terms of subject matters. As K. S. Maniam argues:

> The task of the English-language writer in Malaysia is surrounded by difficulties and problems not normally inherent in a homogenous society. In a homogenous structure there is available a common source of collective imagery, symbols and myths. British literature, for instance, can, where writers employ a religious system of reference, be immediately translated into Christian significance whenever necessary. Where society and readership come from different ethnic groups this kind of referential meaning is not immediately available. The effect is to rob the work of its immediate impact and postpone reader-work rapport to a time when the reader is armed with adequate knowledge of the imagery or mythology employed by the work.[xvi]

Some writers have tried to overcome this problem by attacking the problem of a multi-racial society head-on in their work. Fernando (*Scorpion Orchid*, 1976) and Lee Kok Liang (*Flowers in the Sky*, 1981) are two such examples. But the consternation that Maniam relates may not necessarily be a bad thing. Maniam's first novel, The Return (1981) showcases a predominantly Indian community, while Shirley Lim's fiction tend to privilege middle-class Chinese characters. It is true that a shared pool of references is uncertain, but this only increases the opportunity to learn about other cultures and ethnic groups through the work of dedicated writers. In my view, Malaysian writers should not strive to develop a 'shared system of reference' (although there is certainly that already in the concept of 'nationalism'), but to take advantage of their diversity to educate and to encourage greater understanding and respect for the various races, religions and customs in Malaysia.

On the whole, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader,* is an invaluable contribution to the slow but growing number of critical work on Malaysian literature in English. Despite certain minor faults (the book lacks an index, and does not provide brief biographical data of the various contributors), high regards must be attributed to its editors for their astuteness in choice of essays, many of which are excellent and would remain forgotten if not for their being reissued in this anthology. In this sense, this anthology is also a tribute to the "several heroic pioneering individuals"[viii] who pressed on in their belief that there is a place for a Malaysian Literature in English despite the many seemingly insurmountable political odds along the way to disrupt its development. This anthology is also a positive sign that Malaysian Literature in English is making a strong comeback after remaining in the shadows for the last 30 years.

Endnotes

i Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", *Nation and Narration,* ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London/New York, 1990), p.297.

ii Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation", p. 297.

iii Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader* (Petaling Jaya, 2001). All subsequent references are to this edition.

iv See for example Tham Chee Seong's essay, "The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia" (esp. p. 53) in the anthology for a critical analysis of the role of literature in language other than Bahasa Malaysia before and after the 13 May 1969 incident. "Aimless literature" has the connotation of a literature incorrigibly rooted in rigid traditions that halt the progress of that literature; hence, due to this lack of the potential to change, this form of literature is literally going no-where, and thus, is unsuited to a nation that emphasizes progress, transformation and "modern".

v Koh Tai Ann, "On the Margin, In Whose Canon? The Situation of Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim", *Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader,* p.123.

vi Shirley Lim, "Tongue and Roots: Language in Exile", *Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader,* pp. 302 - 3.

vii Fiona Allan, "Nostalgia Unbound: Illegibility and the Synthetic Excess of Place", *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 14:3 (2000), p. 284.

viii Her poems, "Monsoon History", "Crossing the Peninsula", "Tropical

Colours" and "Song of an Old Malayan" can be read as historically redemp -tive poems. (Shirley Lim, Monsoon History [London, 1994], pp. 17, 20, 21, 36 respectively).

ix Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London/ New York, 1989), p.77.

x Dudley De Souza, "The Roots of Malay[an] Literature in English", *Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader*, p. 5.

xi Lloyd Fernando, "English, Literature, and Bilingualism in South East Asia", p. 20.

xii Lloyd Fernando, "English, Literature, and Bilingualism in South East Asia", p. 21.

xiii Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, "Baudrillard en route to Postmodernity", Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations. Eds. Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, (Basingstoke/London, 1991), p.132.

xiv Lloyd Fernando, "English, Literature, and Bilingualism in South East Asia" p. 22. This word is used in the context of Fernando's analysis of Othello, whom he likens to the Asian media consumer, and Iago, who represents the Western manipulator of the words and images (the media). This again, is another instance of the unconscious text - the text which cannot escape the influence of the west - working through the actual text, which is a critique of the influence of the West through the media.

xv Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1973).

xvi Lloyd Fernando, "English, Literature, and Bilingualism in South East Asia", p. 17.

xvii K. S. Maniam, "The Malaysian Novelist: Detachment or Spiritual Transcendence?", Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader, p. 80.

xviii Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, "Introduction", Malaysian Literature in English: A Reader, p. xiii.

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Review of Farish Noor's *The Other Malaysia : Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History*

by Surinderpal Kaur Ramana

THE OTHER MALAYSIA: WRITINGS ON MALAYSIA'S SUBALTERN HISTORY. By Farish Noor. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2002. 354pp (paper).

What is a nation? What is a subject? What constitutes a Malaysian identity? These are some of the questions that Farish Noor explores in his collection of essays on the Other Malaysia. He dismisses the discursive practice of describing Malaysia as "unified" by calling it a "static and monological" discourse. Instead he revels in a multifaceted and pluralist (albeit fragmented) narrative. It is a narrative that deconstructs traditional notions of the Malaysian identity that are neatly packaged within the inflexible vectors of race and religion - categories which he (and most Malaysians) finds artificial and deeply problematic. In a sense, Farish goes in search of an invisible Malaysia, one which contests the mappeable perimeters of the visible Malaysia. It is an alternative way to understand the Malaysian identity that not only makes room for subjectivity, but also throws into disarray the hitherto fixed categories of ethnic identity and institutional authority.

In this somewhat esoteric collection of essays, Farish Noor moves from contesting the historiography of pre-independence Malaya to reviewing the identity politics of today's Malaysia. He argues that "some of our most conventional and orthodox understandings of the nation-state, the art of government and the political process itself needs to be radically re-considered". Thus, he sets himself the task of first deconstructing, and then reconstructing, history and politics.

Farish revisits pre-independence Malaya in the first section of the collection, "Politics and the Political". In an attempt to enable the subaltern as a subject of his own history, Farish explores the notion that the subaltern can assert his or her autonomy by revising old frameworks through which the native other has always been viewed. He attempts to prove that the historical subject in Malaysian history is far more diverse in its complexity and multiplicity than the monolithic two dimensional figure of the "Malay – Male – Muslim" leader. In his attempts to defy the

simplistic and rigidly defined subject, Farish presents readings of subjects who range from the Sultan whose defiance of the fixed colonial subject comes through his voracious travels, to Ibrahim Yaakob, the leftist leader who was one of the first to mobilize the opposition to the British colonial rule, to the radical nationalistic legacy of the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda*. Farish's subjects are often the marginalized groups who have been instrumental in dismantling colonial structures yet have been forgotten in the rise of the conservative ruling elite.

In the three part account of "The Sultan Who Could Not Stay Put", the passivity of the figure of Sultan Idris Shah of Perak is contrasted with the roving figure of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor. Sultan Idris is a subject whose identity is etched firmly in the binary relationship of dominance and subordination to the extent that although he is awarded the honour of the Knight Grand Cross of the Victorian Order, he is only a "passive recipient". The investiture firmly places the figure of the Sultan as the native "other" – the Sultan was rewarded for recognizing that colonial rule had rescued his people from war and had a civilizing effect upon his society. The investiture ceremony that is organized by the colonizers, replete with traditional and cultural rituals, emphasized the lack of agency of the Sultan and his people. As Farish puts it, it is a "spectacle which incorporated the native while disabling him at the same time by reducing him to the status of passive recipient".

Starkly in contrast to the figure of Sultan Idris Shah is the figure of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor, a man who refused to occupy the space set out for him by the Empire. In an attempt to manipulate the elitist space of authority, the Sultan defied the Empire's definition of the native and manipulated Orientalist discourse to reinvent his own role and identity. He not only literally traversed the physical boundaries placed around him by setting off on travels to suit himself, but in doing so, he also ensured that he had control over the sphere of political and economic power. He succeeded to the extent that unlike Sultan Idris, he still managed to retain some of the traditional feudal characteristics of his kingdom while introducing reforms that paved the way for western modernization. Yet, the agency he possessed was ultimately illusory because he could not break free from the narrative of the weak and disabled native *Other*. Despite his attempts to appropriate the image of the ideal colonial subject, Sultan Abu Bakar was still viewed as a caricature in colonial discourse – "an Anglophile Eastern potentate, slavishly enamoured by

Western beauty and typically corrupt in his lifestyle as well business and political interests". In the end, news of the scandals in his personal life as well as visions of his decadent lifestyle, outweighed his success in fending off British expansion in his territory and his numerous reforms in creating a native bureaucratic system. Colonial prejudice of the native other did not allow room to acknowledge the fact that to some extent, Sultan Abu Bakar did reverse the image of the native Malay as economically incapable and politically incompetent.

Farish does not just locate his historical readings in the past itself. He also draws disconcerting parallels with the present situation in Malaysia. The tale of the autocratic Sultan Iskandar Dzulkarnain's determination to develop ambitious projects to enhance his reputation bears striking similarities to present day Malaysia. In an almost farcical parody, the Sultan's 'mega-projects' are compared to the mega-projects that have helped Malaysia gain a somewhat dubious recognition at the world arena these days. What is deeply troubling is that the unquestioning deference shown to the egotistical Sultan and his ambitions is paralled today in the complete acceptance of grandiose projects that do not really have national interests at heart.

The similarities between past and present are taken one step further in the essay "Feudalism's Economy of Excessive Violence". Here, Farish draws our attention to the parallels between the adversarial practices of feudal times and the current political practices in Malaysia. Just as there would be no prisoners of war during the feudal era, the neo-feudal mindset too has definite ideas about treatment meted out to friends and enemies. Take the case in point; former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's failed attempt to challenge the leadership is seen in the context of a civil war between Malay Rajas. The victorious Raja in the feudal era would resort to a public and violent display of his powers – a display that was often articulated in terms of hyperboles. Farish claims that this practice of excessive feudal violence has been made more efficient and thorough by the advent of modernity. Anwar Ibrahim's defeat is no mere defeat. The modern psyche of the neo-feudal mindset translates the public killings of the feudal era into something less gruesome but just as cold bloodedly effective. Allegations of sexual and financial misconducts are successful in bringing down Anwar Ibrahim. At the same time, the man and all he stands for are effectively destroyed – his political career is in tatters, his fledgling party is shattered, while he himself is erased from "the annals of official history".

The threat of public violence to control subjects in the past has given way to a more sophisticated form of control through threats in finance and business. In addition, there is always the archetypal feudal threat of confinement and abuse of anyone who threatens the status quo. In a biting commentary, Farish proves that all these are very worthy attempts to echo the practices of the feudal *Rajas* and to ensure that the "feudal political and cultural system" of the past is alive and well. Farish is no less critical of Anwar Ibrahim's camp itself. Despite its ideology of social and political reform, the "reformasi" camp is engulfed in the very same rhetoric with which the neo-feudal UMNO party surrounds itself. Its leader too, is elevated to cult status, while in style and tactics, there are disconcerting similarities.

In "Humpty Dumpty Politics", the theme of the inadequacy of language in governance is examined. While stressing the need for "semantic consistency" in governance, Farish shows how the inconsistencies that abound in the private language of politicians can serve to signpost the "deeper inconsistencies in the practice of politics itself". The Orwellian practice of doublespeak and doublethink that characterizes most government discursive structures certainly affect the government's credibility.

Farish argues that the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified cannot be entirely free and ever-changing. In a private language (which, by the way, cannot exist according to Wittgenstein), words can mean whatever one wants them to mean. This, of course, would lead to confusion because understanding in language comes from shared conventions in a language community. Words have to be *sensically* applied , not just uttered on any whim and fancy. Farish takes the famous example of Humpty Dumpty to prove his point. Humpty Dumpty's gibberish is unintelligible to Alice (Through the Looking Glass) but Humpty carries on anyway, pointing out to Alice that "I mean what I mean to say, and that is all." Farish likens Humpty's discourse to the discourse of authoritarian administrations. He takes the federal government of Malaysia to task for its propensity to twist and alter words as it sees fit in order to suit the political game. The deliberate semantic shift in the federal government's discourse on the "royalties" paid to the Terengganu state government by the national oil company Petronas, illustrates this point. After years of calling it "royalties", the federal government now chooses to call it "*wang ehsan*" (charitable financial contributions).

Farish rightly points out that this semantic shift is an integral part of

the complicated dynamics in the relationship between the federal and state governments that repositions the power relations between them. The succeeding conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty elaborates this point further. When Alice points out to Humpty Dumpty that the question is "whether you can make words mean so many different things", Humpty arrogantly replies that the question is, "which is to be master - that's all." Therein lies the crux of the argument – which meaning is to be the master? And just as importantly, who has the authority to decide what a particular word should mean? The rules of signification are often manipulated in the game of politics.

In this case, the federal government's abrupt semantic volte face shows that public political discourse is an exercise in striving for hegemonic control. The space of talk is a strategic site for the struggle over political control. Mastery over this space paves the way for hegemonic control over political ideologies. By trying to appropriate Humpty's discourse and asserting its "mastery" over language (albeit rather crudely), the federal government also tries to asserts its control over the state governments in the game of politics. The effect however is that when one manipulates meanings of words to suit one's own whims and fancies (and of course ulterior motives), then communication is made virtually impossible. When doublespeak becomes an integral part of the discourse of governance , it makes quite a dent in the credibility of the federal government.

Of course, in the Malaysian context, all this also leads to incoherency and unreliability in the discourse of the institutional authority. The reputation of the government has suffered over the years because of its incompetent struggle for mastery in the space of talk. Farish argues that the government needs to crawl out of the hole it has dug for itself. The public needs a politics that is based on truth and is free of ambiguity. And this will only happen if there is a fixed meaning for words (the degree of "fixity" is not an issue with Farish) that allows for consistency in their application.

Language is examined once again through the lens of discourse analysis in the essay "How Mahatir Became Mahazalim". Farish unpacks the epistemology of Khoo Boon Teik's use of the term "Mahatirism". While admitting that Khoo's book *Paradoxes of Mahatirism* differentiates between Mahatir the man and Mahatirism as a political ideology, Farish recognizes that this distinction has become blurred around the edges. Mahatirism as an ideology certainly encapsulates all of Prime Minister Dr Mahatir's ideas and value systems (especially since it is unable to break

free from the idea of binary oppositions). At the same time however, social constructs of a subject are also very much interlinked to the words used to describe that subject. Words not only name a subject, but also help construct the subject in the very act of naming it. Thus , both Mahatir and Mahatirism have become inextricably linked. The Foucauldian notion that discourse constructs the topic is evident here as Mahatir the man, had now become the embodiment of Mahatirism, the ideology.

Farish argues that the term Mahatirism which was linked to conflated versions of terms such as modernity, economic advancement, and progress, underwent a change in meaning as all words and languages are wont to do over time. The "rupture in the old order of meaning" occurred with the removal of Anwar Ibrahim who was an integral part of the Mahatirism ideology up until then. The void left by Anwar who stood for Islamic credentials in the Mahatirism ideology, meant that the discourse of Mahatirism faced a rupture in its narrative that left it (and him) vulnerable to attacks especially from Islamist supporters and the vernacular Malay tabloids. Where once Mahatirism was linked to conflated ideas of modernism and progress, it was now the breeding ground for discourse that emphasized its un-Islamicness and inherent wrongness, and spawned damaging terms like Mahazalim. The rupture caused by Anwar's removal gave rise to the emergence of a new discourse that not only re-constructed the identity of Mahatir but also negated the ideology of Mahatirism. The connection between linguistic and physical vulnerability is metaphoric, perhaps, but certainly very effective.

The critique of conflated terms in the "Malaysian ideology" is taken up once again in the essay "Malaysia Boleh? – PAS and the Malaysian Success Story". Every Malaysian is familiar with the "Malaysia Boleh!" (Malaysia Can Do It) slogan - one which seems to show confidence in Malaysia's success. Yet in a remarkable attempt to break down the ideological spheres in which this rousing slogan operates, Farish argues that one of the true success stories in Malaysia is that of the opposition party, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, popularly known as PAS. I must confess I had never thought of PAS in this light but Farish makes a compelling argument in this essay for a party that never enjoyed any government support or funding. One would assume that the somewhat problematic ideological principles of PAS would in some manner arrest its growth. Yet PAS has proved the critics wrong. It has broadened its support base by appealing to the grassroot network. Farish puts aside his (and many Malaysians')

reservations about PAS and notes that the PAS success story is due to the hard work by the party itself. In contrast to UMNO's tendency to surround itself in a neo-feudal political culture, PAS proves that Malays can achieve a measure of success without the patronage of the elite rulers.

The question that begs to be asked is – where does the author fit into all this? Critical to the point of being almost a radical leftist in the eyes of the administration, Farish's writing is biting and has a hard edge. He often appropriates ideas from western logic and philosophy to prove his point. His essays are peppered with references to cultural and post colonial theory, from Wittgenstein and Focauldian discourse to Spivak's ideas of the subjectivity of the subaltern. Yet at the same time there is a distinct attempt to reach out to the common person in the street. He argues that, "For politics and history to be truly democratic, open and plural, they need to be won back by ordinary people who will take them back to the level of everyday life". It is for this very reason perhaps that Farish's writing ranges from the intellectual to the popular. And it is for this very reason that he exhorts the common Malaysian in the streets to reclaim his or her own agency instead of allowing any political party, be it UMNO or PAS, to control our freedom of thought and speech. Farish argues that resistance and change are crucial to enabling agency. Rather than allow political parties with hidden agendas to dominate the meta-narrative of Malaysia, Malaysians should speak up and put a stop to the "political-religious authoritarianism" that is pervasive in the Malaysian socio-political climate today.

The author rejects elitism, essentialism and an identity based on sameness. Instead he points to the many alternative paths that Malaysia could have taken in its road to independence and modernization. Alternative ways of conceptualizing our past and present promise a possibility of agency. Farish claims that by relating to "the nation as a whole", *The Other Malaysia* opens our eyes to the "manifold possibilities" that can be unfolded by embracing our own subjectivity and plurality. Yet at some points this claim rings hollow. There is a curious void in the collection in addressing many *other* minority and marginalized groups. The collection deals almost exclusively with the Malaysian subject as located in the Malay identity. While it is understandable that the author wishes to contest one aspect of the traditional Malaysian subject, it is a pity that the other minority groups in this case remain entangled in this binary equation as the *Other*.

Hybridity as Challenge to Authoritative Discourse in Huzir Sulaiman's *Eight Plays*

by Susan Philip

EIGHT PLAYS. By Huzir Sulaiman. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2002. 304pp (paper).

Huzir Sulaiman's maiden collection of plays reveals him to be not only a skilled playwright, but also a sharp social commentator. In several of the eight plays collected here he puts Malaysian society under the microscope; his insights are often funny, sometimes uncomfortable and disturbing, sometimes touching, and generally accurate. The plays fall into two broad categories - those with a socio-political dimension, and those which are more concerned with the dynamics of personal relationships. All, however, to some extent look at the realities and challenges of living within a society which experiences constant tension between the official rhetoric of difference and the lived reality of hybridity.

Mikhail Bakhtin has discussed hybridization in linguistic terms, stating that there are two forms of hybridization: "unintentional, unconscious hybridization" which takes place naturally over a long time, and "is one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages" (358). The other form is "an intentional and conscious hybrid [which is] ... a mixture of two individualized language consciousnessess (the correlates of two specific utterances, not merely two languages) and two individual language-intentions as well" (359). Where the organic hybrid melds two different languages or dialects, intentional hybridity suggests the presence of two different modes of thought. Intentional hybridization has enormous political potential because of the inclusion of "two consciousnessess". This politicized view of hybridity as a subversive tool has been appropriated by cultural theorists, with Bhabha in particular applying it to the colonial situation. While Huzir is no longer writing within the colonial situation, the framework within which he writes (of separation and the maintenance of difference) is a holdover from colonial days, appropriated now to nation-building strategies.

Bhabha notes the deep desire of the colonialists to fix, to define, and to essentialize, using the stereotype as "its major discursive strategy" (66). Opposed to this desire for fixity is "the theoretical recognition of the split-

space of enunciation [which] may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (Bhabha 38). Intentional hybridity can recognize and foreground this "split-space of enunciation".

Authoritative discourse in Malaysia creates rigidly bounded categories of race and culture within which all Malaysians officially exist, and which takes no note of the reality of the organic hybridity which exists in society. Cultural purity in Malaysia is an illusion; as Pnina Werbner notes, "...we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions. There is no culture in and of itself" (4 - 5). Despite attempts to define culture and identity in rigidly demarcated, essentializing terms, the reality remains one of change and evolution. Werbner puts these changes down to the functioning of organic hybridity ("unreflective borrowings"). Joel Kahn, however, sees change as part of an active process of "struggle against ... interpellation by dominant discourses" (12); he notes that "cultural identity and identification is, to use a fashionable term, inevitably contested: in other words, ... people do not blithely accept identities given to them, as it were, by either tradition or the blandishments of those in power" (12).

In *Atomic Jaya, Notes on Life & Love & Painting* and *Election Day* Huzir practices intentional hybridity, contesting the identities prescribed by official rhetoric. He inserts what Bakhtin calls his own "language-intentions", performing what Bhabha refers to as "reinscription" (2). He looks at what is 'given' to society by authoritative discourse - essentializing of ethnic identity into rigid, bounded categories of "race"and "culture" - and undermines it through his staging, which questions and challenges what is "given". At the same time, he seeks to legitimize the hybrid both by portraying it as it exists in Malaysian society, as well as by satirizing the prescriptions of official rhetoric.

The most successful play in this collection is *Atomic Jaya*, a surreal, darkly witty piece which trades on the stereotype, the "major discursive strategy" noted by Bhabha. This play is a disturbing comic trip into a bizarre parallel universe where Malaysia develops the atomic bomb. Not only was the play a commercial and critical success, both in Malaysia and Singapore, it also shows Huzir in full control of his craft. Huzir's writing is generally witty, and can sometimes be laugh-out-loud funny (though in

some plays he gets a little carried away with his own cleverness). In this play however medium and message are perfectly matched. The characters are unabashed stereotypes, from the Napoleon-obsessed General Zulkifli, to the Indian physicist who sees everything in terms of cricket, to the sleazy German uranium smuggler Otto who thinks all Asian women are dying to bed the nearest available white man ("I am to you sexy, ja, Asian woman?" The play is fast-paced, almost chaotic, cutting swiftly from character to character. The only still, sane point is Dr. Mary Yuen, the scientist chiefly responsible for the development of the bomb. She is the only character not drawn as a stereotype. She is also the only character whose speech is not marked by a particular idiom linked to a specific ethnic group. Dr. Ramachandran and Dr. Saiful, for example, have speech patterns which specifically identify them according to race. This is also clearly visible in the characters of the two contractors, Teng and Bala. Dr. Yuen speaks the kind of Malaysian English which approximates to standard English and cuts across demarcations of race and culture.

Because those characters with racially distinctive speech patterns are seen as part of the surreal lunacy of the bomb development efforts, they are also linked to the lunacy of the whole scheme. Even though Dr. Yuen is the one who really develops the bomb, her relatively neutral speech helps to identify her as one of the sane ones. She is also the only one who questions what she is doing (and who ultimately saves Malaysia from annihilation).

Huzir chooses to highlight racial stereotyping, turning it into a joke which would resonate deeply with most Malaysians: the General explains the inclusion of Dr. Ramachandran in the bomb-building team by saying that "...most importantly he is here so that we can have one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian. Otherwise not complete. Chinese do the work, Malay take the credit, Indian get the blame" (16). By constantly underlining the racial question through the use of stereotypes so broad as to be lampoons, Huzir demands that his audience in turn question the relevance and indeed the authenticity of such portrayals. We are asked to exist within the boundaries of race and language - but here, these boundaries are taken to a surreal extreme which questions and undermines their meaning.

Notes on Life & Love & Painting, another monologue, challenges official rhetoric, as well as commonly received ideas about 'Malaysian culture'. What is Malaysian culture? Authoritative discourse, which Bakhtin describes as being "hard-edged, a thing in its own right", defined by

"semantic finiteness and calcification" (344), has created a Malaysian culture which depends on ethnic division and the maintenance of a certain cultural chauvinism and "purity". For example, Malaysians of Indian and Chinese descent must look back to India and China for their cultural roots, maintaining inherited cultural traditions with as much fidelity as possible. In this play however the protagonist, lawyer-turned-artist Rashid Khalil, questions the basis of this concept of purity. Malaysian culture (in fact the whole country) is in his word "derivative". He declares that "Almost every facet of our culture is imported....All these things we bring in and graft onto whatever was there before. There's no shame in it. Our culture is everybody else's culture" (135). The important point to note here is Rashid's assertion that "there's no shame in it"; like Rashid, Huzir revels in the 'grafted' nature of our culture. To recognise and accept the hybridity of Malaysian culture is also to recognise it as something which is constantly evolving. Authoritative discourse, however, demands that culture be seen as something monolithic and unchanging.

Towards the end of the monologue, Huzir also looks at racial attitudes in Malaysia with Rashid's story of how a weeping Indian man approached him in a bicycle shop, pouring out his grief at the recent death of his sister. The man confounds Rashid's stereotypical expectations by giving him money, and asking him to repair his bicycle with that money. Rashid states that "right up until that point, half of me was sure he was going to ask me for money, to beg it or extort it, and that the entire speech was a carefully calibrated performance designed to play upon my liberal middle-class guilt." (138). The monologue ends on a positive note, with Rashid asserting that "love must beat fear". This whole collection is in part about "the kindness that I should have had, from the beginning, unalloyed by suspicion or by my bigotry" (138). Writing this, Huzir points a gently admonishing finger at those who make categorical pronouncements about culture, purity, ethnic and cultural divisions and so on. There is an element of fear in such bigotry, (as exemplified by Rashid's encounter with the Indian man), and only love, or openness without suspicion, can overcome it.

Election Day is another monologue, spoken by Francis (an Indian) and relating the story of what happened to him and his two housemates (Dedric, who is Chinese, and Fozi, who is Malay) one election day. The play has something of the air of a mystery or whodunnit (though no one is murdered), with the villain finally exposed in a surprise ending. On a more

symbolic level, it can be read as the courting of the Malaysian people, represented by Fozi's girlfriend Natasha, by the various political parties. It is finally also an indictment of the choices made by the Malaysian people.

This play has a much darker tone than *Atomic Jaya* or *Notes on Life & Love & Painting*; at first reading, it seems oddly lighthearted because of the flippant tone taken by Francis (describing Fozi's anger, he reduces and trivializes it by saying "I thought he was going to run amok, you know. If he ran amok how? Very leceh." (148)). However as we come to the end we realize that it lacks the underlying optimism of *Notes*, or the sense of relief that comes from Mary Yuen's sanity in *Atomic Jaya*. Election Day is suffused from the first with tension and suspicion; we find out, for example, that Natasha appears to have been two-timing Fozi with Dedric, and that Fozi may possibly have disabled the brakes in Dedric's car. These and other incidents undermine the initial happy, racially-balanced, muhibbah vision suggested by the fact that the house is shared by one Indian, one Malay, and one Chinese.

The balance in the house is in fact engineered, manipulated by people with ulterior motives. Each member of this multi-racial little household is there for a specific reason. Shadowy outside forces desire the existence of tension and suspicion, as it deliberately disrupts the harmony that might otherwise exist among the three men. This is the opposite of what Rashid in *Notes* yearns for - an end to fear and bigotry. What really darkens the atmosphere of this play is the realization that the ultimate goal is the perpetuation of fear and bigotry, rather than a movement towards understanding. Division and separation are maintained, and in terms of the plot, authoritative discourse is strengthened rather than disrupted. The ending of the play, however, comes as a shock, pushing the audience to sit up and take notice, to question what has happened, and in this way Huzir does manage to challenge authoritative discourse.

These are the three most overtly political plays in the collection, in so far as they make some sort of comment on the current social situation in Malaysia. They are also among the most successful - Huzir is in control of tone and character. *The Smell of Language* also has a political bent, but it is less successful. The protagonist is, as Huzir intended, "entirely unlikable" (Shunmugam 4), but this has the effect of distancing the audience or reader from what is happening. This does not create a Brechtian alienation-effect; the distance does not encourage us to think deeply about the play. Instead, we are left merely chilled and repelled by the cold self-centredness

of the protagonist (a writer who has been killed), who virtually engineers a young man's death because he "wished for [his] due allotment of certainty" (55) as to who had ordered his own assassination. The political dimension of the play gets lost somewhere between our revulsion at the protagonist, and the convoluted folds of the plot-within-a-plot-within-a-plot.

He exhibits greater control in two rather more personal plays, *Occupation* and *Those Four Sisters Fernandez*. The first is based on his grandmother's experiences during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, and the second is "the playwright's exploration of his own Malayalee roots" (Antares 5). Both plays evince a concern with love, loving, family, and communication. Huzir's writing takes on a warmer, more intimate tone and he shows less concern with ideas of Malaysian culture and identity in general. Rather, he takes up and amplifies the theme of love beating fear, put forward briefly through Rashid in *Notes*.

Although the title of the play suggests a central concern with the actual Japanese Occupation, *Occupation* is more the story of the courtship of Mr. and Mrs. Siraj, as told by the now widowed Mrs. Siraj to Singapore writer Sarah. Again, the play is a monologue, with the same actress playing both Sarah and Mrs. Siraj. As Sarah gets caught up in Mrs. Siraj's tale, she finds herself questioning her own life and values. In spite of this she remains a rather two-dimensional figure. She does not really come to life, and we find ourselves not really caring about her or her opinions. Mrs. Siraj, however, leaps off the page - she is a gentle, dignified lady who remembers the days of the Occupation seemingly without bitterness. She and her sisters, children of a wealthy Muslim family in Singapore, are kept hidden in the family mansion for the duration of the war. Those on the outside pity them, seeing them as virtual prisoners, but Mrs. Siraj's own attitude betrays no self-pity. She concentrates on what was for her the focal point of those years - namely meeting, falling in love with, and marrying Mr. Siraj.

The story is told with great charm and sympathy. Huzir creates no deathless, daring romance here, bound as he is by the reality of the strictness of a traditional Muslim household. Their love grows in fleeting glances and accidental touches. Describing the moment when they fell in love, Mrs. Siraj says "I was 17 - 18 when I opened the door. Just gave the paan, nothing, no talk, nothing. Just our fingers touched, like that. What else you want to know?" (280). This understated simplicity gives Mrs. Siraj and her story a wonderful quiet dignity and depth.

Mrs. Siraj's openness and lack of bitterness contrast sharply with the attitude of Sarah's boyfriend Tony. Like Sarah, Tony is in his 30s, and obviously has had no personal experience of World War II. Yet the Japanese Occupation (and the lack of apology from the Japanese Government) fills him with fury: "I don't care how many individual Japanese feel sorry. You feel so sorry, you force your government to say sorry. You force your emperor to ask my forgiveness." (274). His anger seems somewhat overdone, given that he himself did not suffer and therefore does not actually have anything to forgive the Japanese. His petulant demand for an apology is rendered ineffective by the sincerity of the grief and guilt expressed by Mr. Ogawa, a Japanese businessman who interviews Sarah for a job. Sarah, also distanced from the war by her youth, seems to want to experience the horror of it through Mrs. Siraj, reliving it through the older woman. But she is disappointed. She asks herself why Mrs. Siraj's perception of the occupation seems so limited: "Where is the horror? I want to say to her, Why aren't you making me feel sad? I want to hear how you suffered. Your tales of woe. And yet your occupation is this: loving and being loved, loving and being loved." (275).

This connects with Rashid's words in *Notes*: "Love must beat fear." (138). Mrs. Siraj, although she seems to have been protected from the horrendous suffering that undoubtedly occurred during the occupation, does not strike us as being blind to it. It is more that she has chosen to focus on the love she experienced. That, rather than the war, seems to have been the central, formative experience of her life. She is a deeply sympathetic character while Sarah and Tony are somewhat superficial and pretentious, their concerns centreing around money more than anything else. As Sarah points out, "I'm not sure I have the stamina for the spiritual race. Perhaps the winning is in the running." (277). But does Sarah even run the spiritual race? However, Huzir does not allow pessimism to have the last word. The last words belong to Mrs. Siraj, and we are left with a sweet, simple picture of two pairs of hands touching fleetingly, and forming a bond that lasts a lifetime.

Those Four Sisters Fernandez is a look at the dynamics of the relationships between four middle-aged, middle-class Indian sisters (though one of them is in a coma). Beatrice, Agnes and Helen gather at Janet's house while Janet is in hospital. By the end of the play, Janet is home but still in a coma, while Beatrice's husband ends up in hospital with a heart attack. The sisters are in constant conflict, their animosity and anger based on old

quarrels. Most of the dialogue consists of Agnes and Helen sniping at each other and disagreeing over everything from the best treatment options for Janet to the date of Janet's husband's death. There are, however, moments of connection, when their concern for each other surfaces and cuts through the anger:

Agnes: I haven't said yes yet, I told you.

Beatrice: Don't cry, dear. Why are you crying?

Helen: It's Christmas. There's whiskey. She's Indian. Tradition.

Pause.

Come on, Agnes, don't cry. Don't cry, dearie. Eh, girl? Come on. Then I'll start crying and Beatrice will start crying...

Beatrice: And I'll be forced to make tea...

Helen: And we'll sit around like a lot of Kennedys, aa, gathering every few years to dab our eyes and lament. Eh, girl?

Pause.

Agnes: Have you packed away all the food?

Beatrice: Are you hungry? I can warm something up. (239)

The pause after Helen's first remark signals a shift in attitude, as she and Beatrice register and respond to Agnes' despondency. They maintain a joking sort of mood, but the concern for their sister is real. And Agnes responds to it, as shown by the slight pause after Helen's remark about the Kennedys. In that moment she puts her melancholy aside and allows Beatrice to comfort her by feeding her.

This same quiet mood of connection prevails in the final scene of the play as Helen and Agnes go from being the prickliest of antagonists to quietly sharing the task of helping Beatrice. The last words of the play show Helen and Agnes in a rare moment of quiet agreement. And that is all. There is no spectacular reconciliation, no sudden miraculous awaken-

ing for Janet, no tearful confessions. Just a simple moment of communication which hints at unspecified possibilities. Again, Huzir points to the need for love to overcome fear, bigotry, anger.

Hip-Hopera offers a breezy, light-hearted look at love. It is a musical of sorts, including songs in musical styles as diverse as acid jazz, rap, and 'boy-band'. The dialogue and lyrics are generally slick and clever, and in performance the play was extremely successful. It was well served by a more than competent cast and snappy direction. Its shortcomings are evident in performance but are easily ignored because the play is very entertaining. In print, however, the shortcomings tend to become rather more obvious, and rather more difficult to ignore. Characterisation, for example, is virtually non-existent. The characters are all fairly two-dimensional: Salina, whose heart has been broken, is looking for a new start; Johan is a dilettante playing at running a bar, looking for meaning in his life. The other characters are given even shorter shrift: Derrick is a cunning money-maker, Trey is a DJ, Doris is the business manager. Beyond that, there is nothing to say. The plot is equally thin - Salina and Johan fall in love almost instantly, break up with bewildering suddenness (I'm not entirely sure why but possibly because Salina does not like Johan being too friendly with the female patrons at the bar), then end up together again. The play ends with a rousing chorus: "Love, love/Is all around you/Love, love/Let love surround you" (117).

These criticisms are basically academic nit-picking, however. The play is meant to be fun, a feel-good piece of pure entertainment, and on that score, it certainly succeeds. Some of the dialogue is hilarious. Take, for example, Derrick's description of Johan's attempts at speaking Cantonese:

Derrick: Boss, you know sometimes the small dog want to make love to the big dog, but cannot, because too high, angle wrong?

Johan: Ah.

Derrick: Small dog very frustration?

Johan: Ah.

Derrick: Make sound like that. (81)

The lyrics are smartly satirical and funny. Salina, for example, sings "I don't want no toyboy, I just want a coy boy,/A looker with a Booker, like an Arundhati Roy-boy" (103). Johan, Derrick and Trey poke fun at boy bands and their gullible audiences: "You're a girl of thirteen/and we're the cutest bunch of boys that you've ever seen/You love us a lot/So you never realise that we're not so hot" (69). Clever stuff, and all packaged neatly as a slick piece of entertainment. It is the flimsiest piece in the collection, but on its own terms it is very successful.

The last play in the collection, *Whatever That Is*, is an odd piece that doesn't quite fit with the rest of the plays. A couple discuss their son, who wants to opt out of the establishment as represented by his parents. The irony is that they do not consider themselves part of the establishment. The woman, bemused, says "But I mean, look at us, Tony. Dear old tired lefty Mum and Dad. The most natural rebellion against us would be for him to start wearing stripey shirts and trade forex futures for Goldman Sachs" (286). Huzir says that the play is "really about the psyche of the personas involved" (Shunmugam 5), and he manages to subtly show us some of the strains and stresses between the couple as well as their bewilderment with a teenaged son who is clearly moving in a totally unexpected direction.

Both characters speak fluently, with an elegance of phrasing that is not common in everyday speech. The father, for example, recounts his conversation with the son: "I asked him, I said, "What constitutes, exactly, the ruling class in this social paradigm that you now wish no part of, Steven?" (285). The mother, too, speaks in this way, sounding as if her sentences have been carefully constructed beforehand:

> Woman: I've spent the last thirty years or so firmly believing
> I was an intellectual, with socialist leanings,
> with the attendant police file 8 inches thick, and now,
> and now, my own flesh and blood tells me I'm the
> ruling class. The enemy is within us. The enemy
> is us. We be dem bad peoples. It's a horrible blow,
> isn't it? (emphasis mine) (286).

This lends a curiously formal quality to the conversation between husband and wife. The formality and distance achieved by this intellectually elegant mode of conversation points to the distance between hus-

band and wife. Huzir has used language to delineate the relationship between these two people. Emotion never gets the better of them, remaining as tightly controlled as their language.

Language plays an important part in the last four plays discussed. Huzir is not making political or social points in these plays, as he does in *Atomic Jaya, Notes, Election Day* and *The Smell of Language*. However his use of Malaysian English points to the organic hybridity which is clearly evident in Malaysian society.

Huzir writes in the voice and language of Malaysia - he is particularly skilled at accurately transcribing Malaysian English in its many varieties, without any of the hesitancy or condescension that marked earlier attitudes. Edward Dorall, for example, calls Malaysian English "fragmentary speech which .... while it lends itself to comic situations ... is not ideally suited to serious moods" (2). Irene Wong, going further, suggests that Malaysian English "is not a dialect for expressing one's deepest emotions and aspiration. In other words, Malaysian English is mainly a functional variety of the language, and it functions very effectively within its own sphere of use, but it is seldom used in the expressive domain..." (106). Huzir's use of the language suggests that, while not following standard rules of grammar, Malaysian English is whole rather than fragmentary, and that it is capable of expressing a variety of moods, from the serious to the comic.

Mrs. Siraj, for example, does not generally speak in standard English - reflecting her position as a sheltered, not very highly educated woman born in a less egalitarian time. When Sarah asks her whether she and her family survived the entire war on the food they managed to hoard, she replies "No, no, I mean if it was just us or what, we can, but we give to people, whoever ask, we give. Cannot refuse" (266). Later, describing how she and Mr. Siraj used her family's assistant cook as a go-between, she says "This fella, lah, he will *bodoh-bodoh*, go out, and then in the evening or so when he comes back he will give the note. And nobody knows, not even the cook also don't know. And my sisters all-that also don't know. It's between him, me" (272). This is fairly typical Malaysian English in that it is largely uninflected for tense, and contains certain common tag words or phrases ("or what", "lah"). But the non-standard English does not detract from the dignity inherent in Mrs. Siraj's consciousness of the obligations that attended her family's privileged position. And in the second example, we find that we laugh with Mrs. Siraj

and her stories of romantic subterfuge, rather than at her.

The English spoken by the four sisters Fernandez is instantly recognizable as the language of many educated, middle-class, urban Malaysians. It is much closer to standard English, with the common tag words, loan words, and syntactical idiosyncrasies thrown quite naturally into the mix. Their speech is utterly believable. As readers or as audience, we barely take note that "Malaysian English" is being used, and this is a marker of how deeply it has penetrated all levels of society. By using this organically hybrid speech in his plays, Huzir highlights the fact that a kind of hybrid "Malaysian" identity does exist to some extent. Again, this represents a challenge to the official rhetoric of separation and division.

If I have a quarrel with Huzir's writing, it is his tendency to sometimes be a little too clever, to include self-consciously literary or culturally allusive lines where they don't seem to have any particular purpose. This occurs especially in *Hip-Hopera*; Johan, for example, sings to Salina "Let us go then, you and I/The evening spread against the sky" (113), while later Derrick takes his leave saying "I also have miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep" (100). These allusions serve no purpose, and tend to stick out uncomfortably in otherwise slickly written dialogue. However, this is a minor quibble; by and large, this is an excellent collection of plays, both intelligent and intelligently written.

Huzir's work is subversive and disruptive in its questioning of official constructs of race. He is aware to what extent we have absorbed the official stance, maintaining our prescribed ethnic markers (in our food, our clothes, our language) - hence his fine, detailed observations of, for example, the differences in the way Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians speak English. But despite these cultural and linguistic differences, his characters speak to each other with no misunderstandings - and this suggests the slow, organic development of a non-divisive hybrid identity: a challenge to the hegemony implied by "official rhetoric". Huzir's, therefore, is the intentionally hybrid voice which unmasks and subverts the singleness of authoritative discourse.

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