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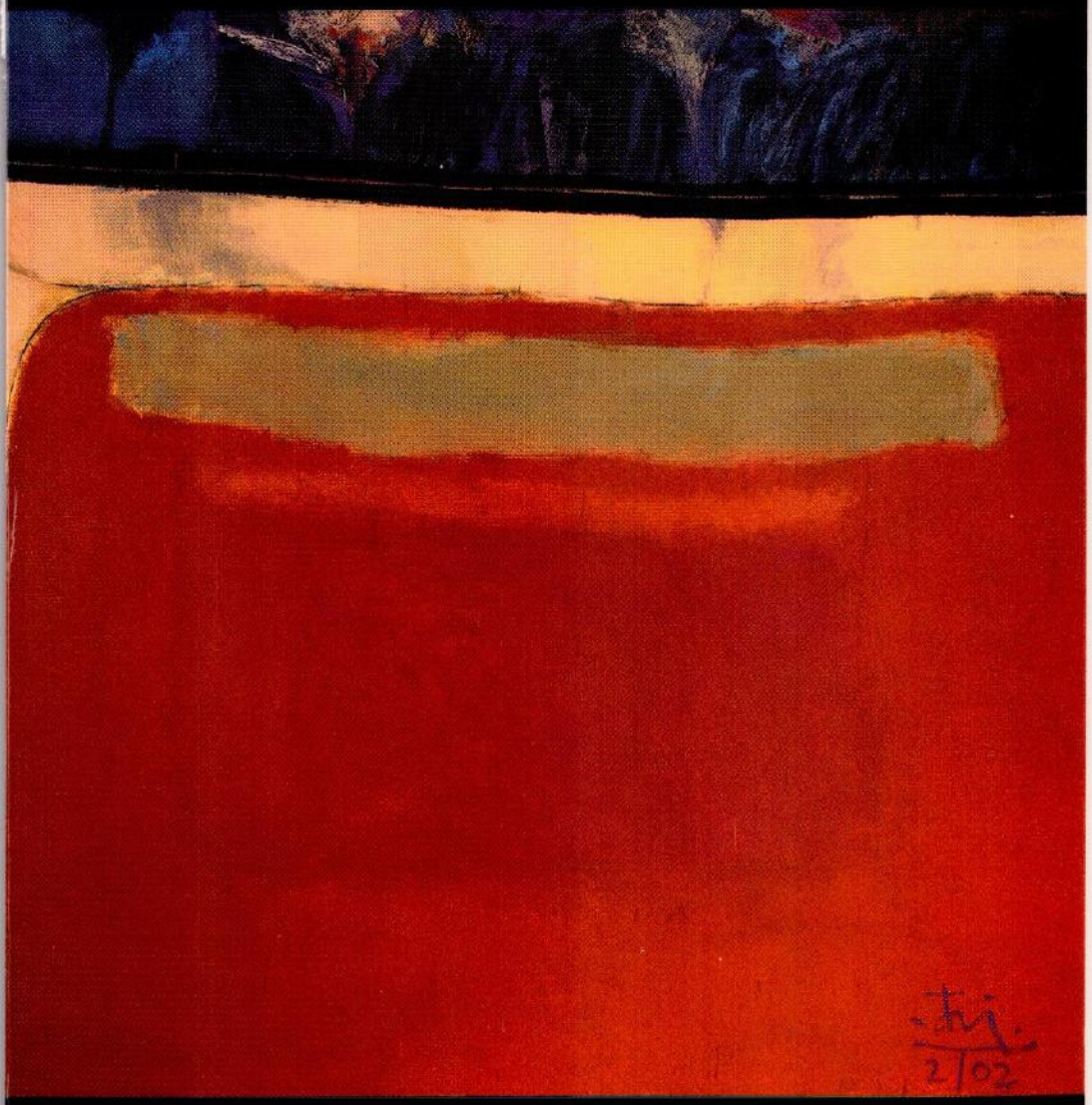
SARE

Southeast Asian Review of English



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.

Submission 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 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 first issue of *SARE* was published under the purview of MACLALS (Malaysian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) in 1980. The idea of turning this long-established journal into an internationally refereed one was mooted in September 2000 by the present board of editors. It has been a long but exciting journey in realising our dream of a "new" *SARE* which benefits from the consultation of scholars from various fields of literary and linguistic studies from different parts of the world. Without the generous help and moral support of our advisory editors, this issue could not have been realised in its present form.

We are delighted to announce that one of our advisors, Yasmine Gooneratne, was recently the winner of the Raja Rao Award for 2001. A poet, novelist, literary critic and social historian, Gooneratne was born in Colombo and educated at the Universities of Ceylon and Cambridge. She has lived in Australia since 1972 and is at present Professor Emeritus at Macquarie University, specialising in the areas of Eighteenth-century and Commonwealth Literatures. She has written 18 books that reflect her varied interests and abilities, both creative and critical, and her versatility in different genres. The Raja Rao Award honours and recognises writers (including scholars and critics) of Indian origin who are settled abroad, and who have made an "outstanding contribution to the literature of the South Asian diaspora". It is instituted by the Samvad India Foundation, New Delhi, India.

Characterization and transitivity: A stylistic analysis of Conrad's Almayer

Shakila Manan

Introduction

The primary aim of this essay is to examine the transitivity choices involving the characterization of Almayer in Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (1895).[1] Conrad seems to have chosen certain kinds of transitivity structures to depict Almayer, those that portray him as a character who is weak, passive and powerless. In this text, Almayer, the white colonial trader, is depicted as a failure as he epitomises the typical displaced European or colonial deracine of British Malaya. Because Conrad appears to destabilise one's accepted notions of the ideal colonial hero, I argue that this demonstrates Conrad's scepticism and apprehensions of empire and colonialism.

In this regard, I concur with Watt's (1993) argument that in *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad attempts to question the "apologists for aggressive imperialism" over their "illicit references" to basic Darwinian principles that in the struggle between species, the ones who survive, the "fittest", should rule over the ones who are deemed weaker, the "unfit" (Watts 1993:86). Darwin's argument in his evolutionary treatise had been used by many staunch supporters of militant imperialism during the late nineteenth century to justify their acts of aggression against foreign lands. They (the imperialists) considered the subjugation of the Other, the inferior race, as totally necessary, a natural act, since they (the imperialists) were far more superior in intelligence and morally "fit" to govern and to lead.[2]

In *Almayer's Folly*, ironically, the ones who survived in the tropical jungles of Sambir were not the Europeans but the natives. The natives survived, Conrad seems to imply, because they were able to harmonise or blend with their primeval setting and for being able to utilise whatever limited resources they had to endure the harshness of their environment. If the aim of the evolutionary process was to strike a balance between

creature and environment, as Darwin had suggested in his theory of evolution, then, clearly, the natives had emerged triumphant and victorious (1993:86). The victory of the natives and the failure of the European can be perceived as attempts on Conrad's part to question the so-called superiority of the European race.

By portraying his central protagonist in such a manner, Conrad appears to have contested the usual linguistic and representational practices of writers in their depiction of the white man in the Tropics. However, Almayer's reversion to a savage or primitive state as the novel progresses clearly illustrate that, in characterizing Almayer, Conrad may also have been largely informed by the discourses of degeneration and atavism.[3] When Conrad was writing and publishing there were doubts and apprehensions about imperialism since it resulted in close cultural contact and interbreeding between native and European in the Tropics. There was fear amongst people during the later part of the nineteenth century that such miscegenetic relationships might cause the European to degenerate or revert to a barbaric or savage state. Almayer is a case in point, as he had fathered a child, after marrying a native woman. In consequence, the "progress" that was promised by colonialism did not seem an attractive idea after all. A reversion to a state of anomie or bestiality was a frightening prospect to the white man as it meant a disintegration of all forms of social order, those markers of Western identity and "civilization".

If Conrad was trying to provide a critique of imperialism by implying that the white man had no business to be in this part of the world, then he does this at the expense of the natives. This is because one cannot help but sense the racist overtones implied by the ideas of degeneration and atavism. Although these ideas may, on the surface, appear to be critical of British imperial ventures, they are in fact predicated on the assumption that Darwin's theory of evolution is true and that the natives are indeed primitive and their civilization and culture debased. These are the givens of society and not refuted at all. It was important, according to this racist perspective, to maintain a strict divide between the races as cross-cultural encounters or what was more popularly known as "going native" may result in interbreeding which will only contaminate or defile the purity of the white race (Boehmer 1995:34). As Griffiths points out, Victorians perceived degeneration and intermarriage as "harbingers of cultural collapse"(1995:144). The act of assimilation, where the Victorians were concerned, was seen as synonymous with "degeneracy and demoralization" (1995:145).

Characterization and transitivity

The focus on transitivity structures is crucial as the language that a writer uses to depict a character or event represents selections that s/he makes out of all the available options in the linguistic system and those selections favour certain ways of seeing and reading whilst others are muzzled or repressed (Simpson 1993:8). These selections, one must understand, are not made at random as choice of lexis, syntactical or clausal structures, is essentially ideological. As Fowler (1986) asserts, linguistic codes or structures do not reflect reality in a neutral manner since they decode, categorise and organise the subjects of discourse and thus, can encode certain views of the world (Fowler 1996:27; Simpson 1993:104). Hence, examining Conrad's linguistic options is an important activity, as it is by the means of choices in the context of his wider socio-discursive and historical factors that one can characterise his view of the world.[4]

It is important to discuss Conrad's linguistic options by situating him in his own socio-cultural and historical milieu and by taking into consideration the discourses[5] that would have impacted on his text, as following Mills (1995), I argue that meaning is not located within the confines of the text, but is more of a negotiation between the knowledge that both the author and reader draw upon when producing and interpreting texts (Mills 1995:34).[6] As such, I consider the formal features of Conrad's text, in this case the transitivity structures, as traces of Conrad's process of production which also act as cues for me in my process of interpreting his text (Fairclough 2001:20).

In my attempts at examining the construction of Almayer's character, I focus on his actions and the events that involve him (Simpson & Montgomery in Verdonk & Weber 1995:139). One knows that Almayer is the central character in Conrad's novel from the title and its introduction. The novel begins with the name "Kaspar" which is Almayer's first name and the referent "he" which refers to him appear in several clauses of the introductory chapter (see the passage below - the referent "he" is italicised). In fact, Almayer is centre-staged in the first chapter as this chapter strongly thematizes Almayer's actions, sensations and perceptions. This chapter registers the sights, smells and sounds as Almayer perceives them. For instance, it is Almayer who evaluates his wife's voice as "shrill" and "unpleasant" and from him we know that he detests his wife. In this passage too, Almayer records his dislike for Sambir, the tropical outpost where he is presently situated in. From this one can say that Almayer functions as the novel's main focalizing consciousness as the omniscient

narrator filters events through him. Part of the passage is reproduced below (*AF* 1976:7):

> "*Kaspar*! Makan!"
> The well-known *shrill* voice startled Almayer from his dream of splendid future into the unpleasant realities of the present hour. An *unpleasant* voice too. *He* had heard it for many years, and with every year *he* liked it less. No matter; there would be an end to all this soon.

Although he is Conrad's central character and focalizer, as the novel progresses one is overwhelmed by a sense of inertia, passivity and inactivity where Almayer is concerned. This impression that one gets of Almayer is consistent throughout the novel and I demonstrate how this is "woven into the fabric of the text" by considering some of the characteristic transitivity choices that involve him. Before attempting this task, let me first briefly explain what transitivity is.

Transitivity is part of a broader, semantic network of relations involving processes (the verb phrase), participant roles (the noun phrase) and circumstances (the adverbials). There are several patterns of transitivity and they facilitate the expression of a speaker's external and internal experiences. This is part of what Halliday (1976) refers to as the ideational function of language (Wales 1989:466). Basically, there are four major types of processes: these are material processes or processes of doing (encoded in verbs such as "stamped", "dragged"); mental processes or processes or sensing (encoded in verbs such as "heard", "watched"); verbalisation processes or processes of saying (realised in verbs such as "called", "whispered"); and relational processes or processes of being (realised in verbs such as "was", "had").

The participants involved in the above process types are analysed in terms of their semantic roles. Hence, they are either Agents (someone or something who is performing an action), Sensers (the one who performs the act of "sensing", "perceiving" and "noticing") and Sayers (the one who performs the act of "speaking") if they are encoded as the subjects of the sentences, or the Affected (the one on the receiving end of the action), Phenomenon (the one who is being seen or noticed) and Target (the entity that is being addressed) if they are positioned as objects of the sentences.

For instance, the sentence "Almayer *stamped* his foot" (*AF* 1976:32) is an example of a material action process where "Almayer" is the Agent, "stamped" is the material process (verb) and "his foot" is the Affected. In the sentence, "He *heard* from her..." (27), "He" is the Senser and "her" the

Phenomenon as "heard" is a verb of perception. On the other hand, Almayer is the Sayer in the sentence "Almayer *called aloud* for his wife and daughter" (77), his "wife" and "daughter" are the Targets and "called" the verbal process. Essentially, transitivity concerns the relationships that are encoded by the verb and the accompanying participant roles in a clause. It is that part of the linguistic system that expresses "who (or what) does what to whom or (what)" (Simpson & Montgomery in Verdonk & Weber 1995:144-145).

With reference to Almayer, I find significant patternings of transitivity structures at work. As mentioned earlier on, such structures help to encode Almayer as an inert, passive and powerless figure. One gets this impression of Almayer as he is constantly depicted as an Agent of verbs that denote inactivity. These verbs seem to epitomise his state of inactivity and inability to exercise any power or influence on anyone or anything. The often static and immobile posture that he assumes is symbolic of his inner being. Below are the first seventy transitivity choices involving Almayer (the various processes are italicized).

- "he *shuffled* uneasily" (*AF* 7)
- "he is seen "*leaning* with both his elbows" (7)
- "he liked to *look* at it" (7)
- "he went on *looking* fixedly at the great river that flowed" (7)
- "he is seen "*standing* on the verandah" (7)
- "he *looked* on the broad river" (7)
- "he *leaned* over to see" (7)
- "Almayer... *watched* it with languid interest" (8)
- "he *drew* back" (8)
- "...*standing* in the close and stifling heat of a Bornean evening" (8)
- "Almayer *worked* at his table" (9)
- "Almayer *hesitated* and *remained* silent" (12)
- "he *felt* himself so well-fitted" (12)
- "He *shivered* in the dark night" (13)
- "He *stepped* cautiously on the loose planks" (13)
- "Almayer *descended* the ladder carefully" (13)
- "he had a vague idea of *shutting* her up somewhere" (13)
- "he *lifted* his head" (13)
- "he *confronted* the anxious yet irate seaman" (13)
- "As he *turned* towards the house" (14)
- "He *stood* still in the path" (14)
- "*muttered* Almayer to himself" (14)

- "Almayer *watched* the canoe" (15)
- "Almayer *stepped* homewards" (15)
- "he *found* himself at the foot of the stairs" (15)
- "he *shook* his fist towards the buildings" (16)
- "He *mounted* the steps of his house slowly" (16)
- "He *rose* from the table" (18)
- "(he) *stood* looking fixedly before him" (18)
- "(he) *passed* his hand caressingly" (18)
- "he *attacked* his rice greedily" (18)
- "he *swallowed* another spoonful" (18)
- "he *stood* silent by his daughter's side" (19)
- "He *looked* up the river" (19)
- "(he) *remarked* calmly" (19)
- "he *whispered* tenderly" (19)
- "he *muttered* drowsily" (19)
- "he *kissed* her (Nina) cheek" (19)
- "Almayer *struggled* with the difficulties of his position" (23)
- "Almayer *stood* alone" (24)
- "(he) *meditated* in silence (25)
- "he *planned* murder in a feeble sort of way" (25)
- "Almayer *cowed* by these outbursts of savage nature" (25)
- "he *drag(ged)* her in by the hair (25)
- "he *thought* of everything" (25)
- "he *built* for her a riverside hut" (26)
- "he *asked* himself" (27)
- "Almayer *watched* across the river" (31)
- "Almayer *stepping* cautiously on the rotten boards" (31)
- "Almayer *stamped* his foot" (32)
- "Almayer... *opened* his heart out..." (32)
- "Almayer *sat* with rounded shoulders" (35)
- "he *descended* the steps" (36)
- "(he) *drag*(ged) his feet (36)
- "he had *sacrificed*" (53)
- "he had *consented*" (53)
- "he *stumbled* slowly" (63)
- "Almayer (would) *climb* up slowly (63)
- "he *muttered* half-aloud" (76)
- "he *shuffled* in his imperfectly adjusted slippers" (76)
- "he *swayed*" (84)

- "(he) *fell* forward (84)
- "he *groped* unsteadily" (113)
- "he *muttered* discontentedly" (113)
- "he *hesitated* a moment" (115)
- "he *walked* unsteadily down the stairs" (116)
- "he *muttered* yet menacingly" (117)
- "he *dragged* himself up the stairs" (117)
- "Almayer *stirred* uneasily with a sigh" (128)

With reference to the above, it is not difficult to imagine the helpless and powerless state of someone who is consistently made the subject of verbs which denote inactivity such as: "shuffled", "leaning", "standing", "looking", "watched", "shivered", "stumbled", "swayed", "hesitated", "muttered", etc. In some clauses, however, the inertia is not reflected so much in the verbs but in the qualifying adverbs. These verbs, when modified, are robbed off their potency. For example, Almayer is said to have looked "fixedly", he stood "still", "silent" and "alone", he mounted the steps "slowly", he stumbled "slowly", he muttered "drowsily", he groped and walked "unsteadily", etc. However, out of the seventy odd process verbs, only seven processes are active and in these constructions we see Almayer in a position of power or in a state of performing an action on someone/something (the Affected). The clauses are:

- "Almayer (Agent) *worked* at his table" (Affected) (9)
- "He (Agent) had a vague idea of *shutting* her (Mrs. Almayer) (Affected) up somewhere" (13)
- "he (Agent) *confronted* the anxious yet irate seaman (Affected)" (13.)
- "he (Agent) *kissed* her (Nina) (Affected) cheek" (19)
- "He (Senser) *planned* murder in an undecided and feeble sort of way" (25)
- "he (Agent) *drag(ged)* her (Affected) in by the hair (25)
- "he (Agent) *built* for her (Affected) a riverside hut" (26)

His static and unresponsive dispositions are further fortified when it is contrasted with Sambir's forceful natural elements. The forceful environment of Sambir does not seem to square with Almayer's physical state. If the former is represented as an alive, active and sentient force, the latter is constructed as an inert, immobile and passive figure. For instance, whilst Almayer "whispered", "muttered", "stood", "watched", "meditated", "shuffled" and "looked", Sambir's rivers and trees "roared",

"swirled", "leaped", "sprung", "whipped", "mounted" and "lashed". The contrast is necessary as it helps to make Almayer's sense of apathy and powerlessness in a foreign land all the more poignant.

The potency of Sambir's natural elements is made possible by the choice of processes that have been constructed around them. Most of the processes involving Nature are Material Event processes as they concern inanimate actors in processes of doing. In such clausal structures, they require the presence of an Object or an Affected entity. As an Agent in this text, Nature often takes Almayer or its own natural elements as its Object or Affected entity. This phenomenon can be observed from the following clauses:

- "the intense darkness (Agent)... had *closed* in upon the river (Affected)" (13)
- "the bush (Agent)... *scatter(ed)* a shower of muddy water over Almayer (Affected)" (15)
- "...a silvery-grey tint (Agent) *crept* over the sky (Affected) (59)
- "...plants (Agent)... *climb(ed)* madly and brutally over each other (Affected)" (61)
- "the heavens (Agent) had *descended* upon him (Almayer) (Affected)" (128)
- "the upper reach of the river (Affected) (is) *whipped*... by the wind (Agent)" (128)
- "the merciless creepers (Agent) *clung* to the big trunks (affected)..." (134)
- "the merciless creepers (Agent)... *seek* out the smallest branches (Affected)..." (134)
- "the merciless creepers (Agent) ..*carried* death to their victims (Affected)..." (134).

Unlike Nature, Almayer's actions seldom affect any other people as they only affect himself or parts of his body. This is because Almayer is consistently placed as the Agent of processes that are typically reflexive (Simpson & Montgomery in Verdonk & Weber 146). Put another way, in most clauses Almayer is both the Agent and Affected. When parts of his own body are taken as Affected, at times they begin to behave involuntarily, that is, they seem to have a life of their own, thereby making Almayer lose control of them. This further accentuates his defenceless and powerless state. But more than that, such transitivity structures indicate that Almayer is someone who is unable to govern or manage his own life thus rendering acts of "control" and "victimization" by a stronger

force possible. For example:
- "he *felt* himself so well-fitted" (12)
- "he *lifted* his head" (13)
- "his ear *detected*" (14)
- "Almayer's heart *gave* a great leap" (14)
- "he *found* himself at the foot of the stairs" (15)
- "his eye could *follow*" (16)
- "he *shook* his fist towards the buildings" (16)
- "he *asked* himself" (27)
- "Almayer *stamped* his foot" (32)
- "Almayer... *opened* his heart out" (32)
- "he *dragged* his feet" (36)
- "he *stumbled* slowly" (63)
- "his teeth *chattered* against the glass" (83)
- "he *swayed* (84)
- "he *fell* forward" (84)
- "his trembling fingers *fumbling* about his throat" (113)
- "His bloodshot eyes *wandered* aimlessly from face to face" (116)
- "his head *fell* on his breast" (117)
- "his eyes *closed*" (117)
- "he *dragged* himself up the stairs" (117)
- "Almayer's head *rolled* from shoulder to shoulder" (128).

Apart from processes such as "confronted", "kissed", "drag(ged)" and "built" which construct Almayer in a position of power (as illustrated earlier), most of the other clauses encode him as someone who is helpless and defenceless especially when he is made an Agent of supervention processes such as "stumbled", "swayed" and "fell" as in "he stumbled", "he swayed", "he fell", etc. In such clauses, things just happen to Almayer, and there's nothing much he can do about them. In addition, even though there is a possibility for him to be cast as a powerful Agent of processes such as "found", "struggled" and "stamped", the Affected entity turns out to be his own self (as shown earlier). For example:
- "he *found* himself at the foot of the stairs (15)
- "he *shook* his fist towards the buildings (16)
- "Almayer *struggled* with the difficulties of his position (23)
- Almayer *stamped* his foot (32)

Almayer's powerless state is further reinforced when a number of

constructions depict him in the Affected/Recipient/Phenomenon position in a clause. These constructions show an Almayer being acted upon or sensed by other characters, namely Mrs. Almayer, the natives, and Nina who function as Agents/Sayers/Sensers in these clauses. Here, as we can see, he is the constant target of Mrs. Almayer's verbal and mental abuse and the "victim" of Lakamba and Babalatchi's evil plottings. (The Affected object, Almayer, is italicised.) For instance:

- "The well-known shrill voice (Agent) startled (Material Action) *Almayer* (Affected)" (7)
- "(his wife) (Agent)... treat(ed) (Material Action) *him* (Affected) with a savage contempt (Circumstance)" (24)
- "she (Agent) will poison (Material Action) *me* (Affected)" (25)
- "...she (Senser) hated (Mental) *him* (Phenomenon)" (25)
- "...her jealous eyes (Senser) (was) watching (Mental) *him*(self) (Phenomenon)" (25)
- "Lakamba (Subject) ...exercised... and plot(ted) against (Material Action) the old Rajah and *Almayer* (Object)" (25)
- "*Almayer* (Object) (was) cowed (Material Action) by these outbursts of savage nature (Subject)" (25)
- "(she) (Subject) face(d) (Material Action) *him* (Object) across the table (Circumstances) (35)
- "(she) (Sayer) heaped (Verbal) (scathing remarks and bitter cursings) on *the head of the man* (Recipient)" (35)
- "(she) (Senser) sent (Verbal) shafts of indiscriminate abuse after (*Almayer's*) *retreating form*" (Recipient) (36)
- "Reshid's wrath (Senser) was principally directed (Mental) against *him* (Phenomenon)" (42)
- "Lakamba and Dain (Subjects) induced (Material Action) *him* (Object) (62)
- "she (Sayer) seemed to fling (Verbal) unutterable scorn on *Almayer* (Recipient)..." (110)
- "you (Nina) (Subject) have torn (Material Action) my heart from *me*" (Object) (157)
- "you (Nina) (Subject) have deceived (Mental) *me*" (Phenomenon) (157)
- "your eyes (Nina) (Senser) lied (Mental) to *me* (Phenomenon)" (157)

Concluding discussion

The transitivity analysis above clearly illustrates the fact that it is Almayer who is made the focus of this text. Almayer occupies a number of positions

in the various clausal structures that have been identified in the text. In most clauses, Almayer is positioned as an Agent and as the Affected object. Even though he is made an Agent in several clauses, he does not affect others, only himself, as he is consistently cast as an Agent of supervention processes. It can also be seen that he is made a participant of verbs that denote some kind of inactivity. Such clausal structures only help to highlight a sense of apathy, inertia and powerlessness with regard to Almayer.

From the consistent transitivity choices that have been made, Conrad appears to contest the discourse of racial superiority that helped to inform and structure Darwinian thought. Judging from his characterization of Almayer, the implication is that the white man may not be the "fittest" one after all. This, Conrad seems to imply, is one of the negative consequences of imperialism. The European who is left in the periphery culturally isolated from his own kind is under constant threat. He may regress to an "uncivilized" state as he experiences greater contact with the native. Although Conrad shows a willingness to question particular aspects of Darwinian thinking, he does not go the whole hog as certain assumptions about the native's culture and civilization remain uncontested. Consequently, in this text, Conrad reinforces the discourse of Othering by constructing the natives as lacking or deficient in order, discipline, intelligence, beauty, culture and civilization. Here, European norms and behaviour are used as the yardstick.

Being uncultured and uncivilized the native or the Other is projected as the antithesis of the civilized colonial Self. One of the ways in which Conrad depicts the natives' uncivilised state in this text is to label them as "primitives", "savages", "beasts", "backward" and so on. Such depictions help to relegate the native to a time that belongs to the European past (cited in Mills 1991:89). Perceiving the Other as deficient in certain areas only helps to embolden the white man's sense of racial, cultural and intellectual superiority. And yet, it is ironical that in representing Almayer as a weak and irresolute character, Conrad is indeed attempting to contest this very idea of racial superiority. This perhaps reflects, to a certain extent, Conrad's ambivalence towards the project of Empire.

The idea that races can be categorized in a hierarchy of sorts with the European at the top and the native at the bottom is not challenged at all. It would certainly not be possible for Conrad to do so; as Shohat & Stam point out, colonialist discourse "saw different races as different species, created at different times" (1994:41). Perhaps, more than that, it would

not be possible for Conrad to challenge prevailing assumptions about the Other as colonialist discourse and other discourses that were circulating during this time, in particular the discourses of Eurocentrism and Othering and their textual conventions would have acted as restrictions and constraints on his productive capacity.

Notes

[1] This essay has been adapted from one of the chapters of my thesis entitled *Point of View and Ideology in Narrative Fiction: A Stylistic Analysis of Selected Works of Conrad* (Shakila Manan, 2000).

[2] It needs to be stressed that it was not just Darwin's theory of evolution that provided the justification for imperialism. Scientific progress, in general, coupled with technological innovations in the nineteenth century, boosted the white man's confidence in himself and his colonising ventures. Basically, science and technology reinforced the idea that he was superior in intellect and assured him that greater progress can only be achieved if and when he extended his geographic horizons.

[3] It was Max Nordau, a Victorian positivist, who popularized the idea of degeneration in his book *Entartung* that was published in Germany and later translated into English under the title *Degeneration* (Griffith 1995: 153). To Nordau, degeneration unleashes unrestricted and unimpeded desire in Europeans often resulting in a rapid decline of their civilization. These desires were primal and associated mainly with "primitive" men but the contemporary decadence of Europe as a result of rapid progress, industrialization and urbanization can exact its toll on the "civilized" European. There was a price to pay for colonialism and progress and this frightened the European because these ideas were based on theories drawn from science and technology.

Nordau's understanding of "degeneration" as reversion to a primitive state was a fairly "watered-down" version of "atavism", a condition that implied a reversion to a more primitive state of man. Cesare Lombroso worked on this idea of "atavism" by drawing from Darwin's theory of evolution and the field of anthropology. He postulated that there were many similarities between primitive man and criminals and perceived them both as evolutionary "throw-backs", those whose development had somehow been stalled at a primitive level. The criminal and "primitive" men were similar in that in both there was a clear absence of moral sensibility, a general instability of character, excessive vanity and irritability, desire for revenge and so on (1995:161-162). Lombroso's attempts to elide the differences between primitivism and criminality were regarded as controversial and widely debated upon. Both degeneration and atavism represented attempts at challenging certain dominant assumptions about imperialism and European "civilization".

[4] This is a view that is proposed by critical linguists. Critical linguists and

stylisticians tread the same path as they both interpret texts on the basis of linguistic analysis. Their code of practice can be directly traced to the work that was carried out in the 1970s by Roger Fowler, Gunther Kress, Bob Hodge and Tony Trew at the University of East Anglia. With the publication of their "critical linguistic manifesto" in their book *Language and Control* in 1979 research within this tradition has gradually increased over time.

[5] The notion of discourse as employed here is derived from Foucault (1972). Foucault conceives discourse as language and the system of rules that enable utterances or texts to be produced (Mills 1991:8). Because of its dependence on rules, a discourse tends to be prescriptive as it imposes limits and restrictions on what is possible to say or not to say, and what is possible to do or not to do, about the objects of discourse in relation to the institutions that they are derived from.

For instance, colonialist discourse via its objects of "race" and "empire" specifies what it means to be English (male or female) or non-English (male or female), how each is to think of her/himself, how each is supposed to act and behave, how each is to be positioned in discourse and how each is supposed to interact with members of the same race and with the other. In addition, it also specifies what it means to be a superior nation, how it should perceive other nations, which are weaker than it is, and how it should conduct itself in relation to these weaker nations. This means that discourses, be they colonialist discourse or any other discourse, are essentially constitutive since they do not just represent or reflect social entities and relations; they construct or constitute their objects in different ways and position people in different ways as social subjects (Fairclough 1992:3-4).

Because of the constitutive and prescriptive tendencies of discourse, this explains why texts that are constituted by colonialist discourse tend to share similar characteristics. This is an important point that Edward Said (1978) raises in his book *Orientalism*. Said, who draws upon this notion of discourse from Foucault's work, argues in his book that both literary and non-literary works that write about the Other tend to share similar motives and have similar effects. This is because "In the system of knowledge about the Orient (the Other), the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congerie of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation" (cited in Mills 1991: 73; Said 1978:177). He further elaborates by saying that these texts are textually similar as they construct the Orient as the Other, securing them in powerless object positions whilst reserving the more powerful subject positions for the Westerners. The Other, which is being referred to, is the colonial Other, the entity who is unfamiliar to a dominant subjectivity, the "negative against which an authority is defined" (Boehmer 1995:21).

[6] Following Mills (1991), I argue that the reader has a much more prominent role to play in the interpretive process. The reader confronts the text with a set of discursive experiences to her/his credit. The relationship between this reader and the text is dialectical, "a negotiation of meaning between a subject's multi-faceted sense of self and the many interpretive positions which a text may make possible" (Stephens 1992:48).

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Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and K.S. Maniam's *In A Far Country*: Two Approaches to Nationhood

Neil Khor

This essay is primarily interested in exploring the approaches of two Malaysian authors to the theme of nationhood in two of their works.[1] While much has been written about the novels of both K.S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando individually, not many have offered criticism in the form of a comparative study of their works. Critics have also approached the works of these writers, especially K.S. Maniam, as "race" writing or as evidence of works written from the point of view of the exiled. Although the theme of nationhood is not new in the works of many Malaysian writers in English, by highlighting this theme, this paper hopes to explore how both writers deal with the immigrant experience and how each views "national" identity in his work.

Migrant theories of nationhood

While postcolonial theory has liberated literary criticism from the shackles of a colonial view-point – allowing us to read our nation's narrative as a central theme and not as a peripheral story of conquest and subjugation – several theories of nationhood have since grown out of this "nationalist" phase to embrace new contestations from "minority" voices within the nation state.[2] This perhaps partly explains the growing significance of "migrant" literature or quasi-biographical tales of "coming to the country". We see this in runaway successes like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (2000), a precursory tale of the author's *bildungsroman* in Ireland before coming to the United States or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), another American migrant story. The works of migrant writers, whether Asian American or Indian Malaysian, showcase similar preoccupations with the past and nearly all highlight a "period of adjustment" in their adopted country. Underlying this preoccupation is the migrant communities'

attempt at visibility and expressed need to be part of the nation-definition process. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) is a good example where stereotypes of the American Chinatown are both imploded and reclaimed. No longer is Chinatown merely a reflection of a Chinese ghetto in the minds of the Anglo-Saxon dominant culture, it is now a space associated with the Chinese American community in the U.S. West Coast.

Theories linking space with identity have become increasingly popular as a point of view in reading works by migrant writers or by those who operate within a dominant culture. In Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, for example, the idea of the "nation" is made up of the collective voices of migrants in England, whereas in this case, the migrant Indian community's identity is inextricably linked with its occupation, material culture and history. Thus, migrant literature is the expression of that singular struggle to be seen and to be heard within the larger and more dominant "national" culture.

Migrant literature in English in Malaysia has a long history that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. While the themes in these works are diverse and the earliest works rather stilted, the idea of political affinity with the adopted country is unmistakable. Yet the pursuit of visibility is often a difficult, if a not dangerous task, and writers have been accused of reinforcing stereotypes. Inadvertently, talking about one's community will lead to depictions that are often unflattering. The earliest writings in English from nineteenth-century Malayan journals like the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897-1907) provide an interesting example of what many today would consider to be stereotype-reinforcing stories about the Malayan Chinese's addiction to opium and gambling. Yet these early writings point to a larger and more significant effort by colonised subjects to find or discover a voice. It is interesting to note that the gambling den or the opium farms were then used as an identity-reinforcing "space". But herein lies the bind that comes with distinguishing oneself from the collective whole – this visibility comes with the price of alienation. Literature in English in Malaysia has a long history of being at the periphery especially since the implementation of the Malay language as the national language of Malaya after 1957 and subsequently after the national cultural policy was officially enforced in the 1970s.

Writing in English which started during the colonial period as a means to distinguish oneself as a people, has ironically written itself into becoming the "other" by which the present national culture was

formulated. As there were no overarching myths or all-encompassing "spatial" expressions that everyone in this nation could adopt, Malaysian writers in English like K.S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando have produced works which are tied to their respective "spaces", often discussing or highlighting their little corners in their adopted countries. While they long to belong, the cultural geography of their works fails to galvanise the entire nation. This paper will explore the cultural space of the "nation" that is at the cornerstone of two of their later works published in 1993.

A sense of non-belonging

In Malaysia, a nation formed in 1963, the concept of a national culture was ambiguous if not opaque. Before the racial riots of May 13 1969, Malaysia was a melting pot defined by the co-operation of the three major races, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. However, after the incident, the government imposed, in authoritarian fashion, a national culture to promote national unity. This gave rise to the present hegemony of Malay as the dominant culture of the nation. The Malay language was further strengthened as the sole official language (English having been displaced) and while the cultural practices of the other races were permitted, they were now largely confined within the newly imposed boundaries of race. Compounding this invisible but segregative barrier was the rise of Islam in the country. National culture was therefore no longer a purely cultural matter but also included religious elements clearly dividing the races. Both novels which I wish to examine, and in fact much of Malaysian writing in English since the implementation of the national cultural policy, are a reaction or description of life under this rather divisive policy. Fernando's novel describes the intellectual conflicts arising from the enforcement of the national cultural policy while Maniam's novel explores its effects some 25 years later.

The nation in Fernando's *Green is the Colour* continues to elaborate the problems of racial politics established in his first novel *Scorpion Orchid* (1976). In this second novel Fernando takes on a subject still very much taboo in Malaysia – the 1969 racial riots – and makes it a common reference point for his characters' ideas on "nation". The spatial terrain where this debate takes place is Fernando's familiar university campus. Readers may find the prose style in this novel rather challenging, as Fernando's novel is littered with allegorical stereotypes. At times certain parts of the novel read like a morality play with characters becoming stark symbols or even mouthpieces expressing rather academic ideas. Notwithstanding that in

Green, Fernando attempts to cull from the *Malay Annals*[3] - a text considered the cornerstone of Malay literature - a love story between two people who were forcibly separated by a feudal lord, his novel does not succeed in going beyond stirring the national curiosity about the tragic incident. Ironically like the *Malay Annals* itself, the novel is limited by its own "spatial" boundaries. It is therefore a novel of ideas set quite apart from mainstream Malaysian society.

Following the plot that he had selected from the *Malay Annals*, Fernando's heroine is Sara, a university lecturer of moderate political beliefs. She is American trained and now married to Omar, an Islamic "fundamentalist". Her love interest is Yun Ming, the "new" Chinese Malaysian who works for the post-1969 government and in some circles seen as a traitor to his race. The feudal lord is Panglima, a politician who advances his career by manipulating racial sentiments while working under the cloak of nationalism. Almost recalling his first novel, the human love-hate relationship in *Green* is a reflection of the "race relations" that defines his "nation". Fernando however does not attempt to go beyond the boundaries of the university and even though his characters all move physically out of the campus, their ideas remain academic. It is therefore not surprising that the physical setting of *Green* is contrived, perhaps reflective of this strategy.

On the other hand K.S. Maniam's *In A Far Country* describes a "nation" that is anything but a *tabula rasa*. This is a novel about a citizen's search for some sort of organic association with his adopted country. This reveals an interesting side of Maniam's works for only those who feel they do not belong need to go searching for belonging. Unlike Fernando's "nation" of intellectuals where even banter is devoid of popular humour, Maniam's nation is pregnant with a past that lives in each of its citizens and, one might add, that inhibits them from becoming full citizens of their adopted country. To truly belong, Raju, the main character in Maniam's novel, uproots himself from a comfortable life to pursue the "tiger" in the wild. This is a symbolic search for an organic link with the "spirit" of his adopted country. Here Maniam's protagonist leaves the comfortable city terrain for the lush tropical rainforest. Although Raju has broken free from the poverty of his rubber estate existence - the spatial nexus of Maniam's Indian Malaysians - he is plagued by guilt because he does not seem to belong to what he thinks is the "indigenous" landscape. If the campuses in their minds restrict Fernando's characters, Maniam's characters all battle to go beyond the physical boundaries of the rubber estate only to fail in

the wild Malaysian jungle.

Taking into account what has been said above, the title of Maniam's novel is a pun because the far country either refers to India, the country of Raju's origin, or the elusive Malaysia, his adopted country. While Fernando's characters were sure that they belonged, Maniam's characters are never sure they are welcome. Here lies the central difference in the philosophy underlying each writer's definition of the "nation" in the novels. While Fernando's nation is defined by citizenship and participation in democratic nation-building processes, Maniam's nation is more organic where the people must feel physically rooted to the country that they now call home.

It is not surprising therefore that both writers adopt rather different approaches to deal with their hegemonic national culture and in finding their place within the national consciousness. While organic belonging is only slightly explored in Fernando's novel, it is the cornerstone of Maniam's definition of nationhood. Fernando is not preoccupied with the past that each character brings with him or her. He is more interested in what they will do with that past in the shaping of their nation. His point seems to be that the people will be able to reach a consensus if not for the interference of politicians. For Maniam, the nation is not merely a process of elections and political expressions. People need to feel they belong or they will find their lives meaningless. This is aptly expressed by the character Sivasurian, the eternal traveller in *A Far Country*, who says:

> Something has gone on inside men's mind that changed their whole world view of life and the world. They've even changed the world into what was never meant to be. What I'm saying, thambi, is that the sun isn't itself.
>
> (88)

The journey to belonging begins with a change in perceptions. Sivasurian explains to Raju that these changes can sometimes be radical and bring about things that were never meant to be. Echoing the migrant's search for belonging and visibility, Maniam's approach to nationhood begins in the mind but will lead to physical changes. Fernando's characters will disagree for their philosophy constitutes a counterpoint to Maniam's ideas. Fernando believes that the road to nationhood begins in intellectual debate. Both writers therefore adopt different approaches to nationhood and the following section will explore this.

Two approaches to nationhood

It must be made clear that every nation has to have a sense of national culture. In largely monocultural nations like Japan, things "Japanese" are simply defined by what is considered unique to the majority of Japanese. This, however, alienates small minorities like the Ainu tribe living in Hokkaido. The Japanese language is widely accepted as the national language and together with a long history of being isolated, the Japanese nation has an easier time in defining what is "national culture". Yet according to cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, national culture is constantly evolving and as such is constantly being challenged. Migration is one of the greatest stimuli for fresh contestations of accepted definitions of "national cultures".[4]

The approaches adopted by both these writers continue the contestations that characterise Malaysian literature in English. Fernando's approach to nationhood is subversive because it challenges the established or official national culture of the country. However, its reception in 1993, the year of its publication in the midst of a booming Malaysian economy, was lukewarm. In fact, many saw it as anything but a contemporary Malaysian novel. Critics felt that the novel's concerns and themes were reminiscent of an era in Malaysian history long forgotten or with one that has been largely ignored. Dahlan's call for Malaysians to look beyond race is old-fashioned especially today after 32 years of race-based policies. The allegorical structure of the novel betrays Fernando's belief that in an "enlightened democracy" national identity should be based on the merits of citizenship, not race. This has been Fernando's approach to nation definition. One other interesting aspect of this approach, but also perhaps its biggest weakness, is that while Fernando attempts to adopt the points of view of all the races, he cannot help but speak from his own immigrant perspective. Thus the perspective of his "native" characters appears academic and at times even trite while the immigrant point of view appears to have more authorial support.

The allegorical structure of Fernando's novel provides very interesting markers of a nation divided by race. Although the nation for Fernando, as explained earlier, is symbolised by a melting pot of differing and contentious "racial" perspectives, his character's stereotyped roles reveal the very reason for dividedness in the nation. Today the novel has gained new currency as it reveals how the racial politics of the last thirty years have shaped Malaysia – the wellspring of Fernando's fictitious "nation".

While current events prove Fernando correct, his perspective about how the nation-state views the immigrant – in this novel represented by the characters of Yun Ming and Gita – is sadly proven to be also an accurate assessment. Contemporary Malaysians of migrant ancestry, Fernando seems to say, are caught in a bind because they live in a country that defines national identity on the basis of race and religion. While the agile Yun Ming adapts to his new situation and soon demonstrates his linguistic loyalty by speaking Malay, the colour of his skin will forever dog him. Gita like Sara faces "racial" opposition to her love interests. The very biology of national unity represented by loving across the borders of race is no longer "natural" but is seen as an act of treason against the new, artificially imposed racial allegiances that now define the nation. Sara is perhaps the first to realise the true meaning of the racial riots of May 13 and how it has changed her "nation":

> Nobody could get May sixty-nine right, she thought. It was hopeless to pretend you could be objective about it. Speaking even to someone close to you, you were careful for fear the person might unwittingly quote you to others. If a third person was present, it was worse, you spoke for that person's benefit. If he was Malay you spoke one way, Chinese another way, Indian another. Even if he wasn't listening. In the end the spun tissue, like an unsightly scab, became your version of what happened: the wound beneath continued to run pus.
>
> (93)

The anxiety expressed by Fernando's characters reflects the growing dissatisfaction among the nation's citizens but more importantly it betrays the growing hegemony of nationalistic expression. To the author, these racial allegiances demonstrate how governmental policies impede national integration.

Fernando's answer to the new hegemony of nationalistic and one-race dominance is his idealistic hero-martyr Dahlan. This is a deliberate attempt to be incongruent with the real politics subsequent to the 1969 racial riots. As suggested earlier, viewed in this perspective, Fernando's novel offers an interesting window into events and prevailing ideas that eventually led to the Malaysia of today. Yet to begin approaching nationhood from past events is perhaps the root cause of the futile resistance of Fernando's characters to forces that seem to overwhelm them. Like Prometheus, the nation in *Green* has its fate sealed from the onset. Fernando is merely revisiting events that he cannot prevent. Thus the novel opens with

Dahlan's discovery of the poison of racial politics and in Yun Ming's unconscious mimicry of nationalistic rhetoric:

> Yun Ming found himself saying with fervour that the Chinese and the Indians had to forget where they came from. They must follow one way of life, have one way of doing things. He caught himself in time before being swept into saying they should have one religion. After an interval it was Panglima who, learning of Yun Ming's position in the Foreign Ministry, had asked that he be seconded to the Home Ministry for urgent work covering unity. Now Yun Ming was being moved again. He didn't mind. Everything was for country and nation.
>
> (21)

Although Fernando appears to challenge this view of the nation – where assimilation with the dominant race and its culture is required of the immigrant - *Green* fails to convince the reader of any viable alternative. Fernando's attempts to re-create a nation in his novel based on the bonds of friendship between Dahlan, Gita, Yun Ming and Sara, seem artificial.

Yet memory is not all bad for in this web of friendships is reflected Fernando's microcosm of national events, concerns and representation of what the nation could have been. In this academic exercise, there is an honest dialectics between the people. Here Fernando attempts to see things from the point of view of the racial other. He flatly says that there is some truth to the claim that the immigrant has no understanding of the land. Sara accuses Yun Ming early in the novel of not knowing the land. The urban space is where the immigrant created his niche in the country. The Chinese, as one character in Fernando's novel says, "never shared with anyone" but now "they must share" (93).

The reader cannot help but wonder what Fernando hoped to achieve by his attempt to resist history in his novel and by demonstrating the futility of a nation bound together by a "friendship" of impractical and divergent aims. It becomes clear much later in the novel that Fernando wrote about a time, and some might suggest still believes in such a time, when such boundaries were not yet enshrined and made official by the government. In using memory, Fernando is able to explore how the nation as it is in 1993 was born.

In Maniam's novel, the nation is defined very much within the confines of one character's experience and this influences his approach. Thus, as explained earlier, Maniam's novel describes the effects of the National Culture Policy that Fernando resists. Instead of creating a utopia based

on what could have been, Maniam's characters all attempt to break out of the boundaries of race. If they cannot do it physically – by removing or changing national policy – they can do it within the confines of their imagination. Maniam's Indian Malaysian protagonist, as though answering the challenge by Sara in Fernando's novel, decides to take up the all-important issue of land, a symbol of belonging.

In his flashbacks and "re-acquaintance" with where he came from, Raju – Maniam's protagonist – encounters people who once figured prominently in his life. He recalls Lee Shin who killed himself because he could not adapt to the changes that were going on around him. Lee Shin, like many immigrants, feels he does not belong to the new national landscape because he identifies solely with his immigrant past. While the land has changed because of contact with the immigrant, as personified in the urban landscape created by immigrant industry, the immigrants themselves have also changed due to their contact with the land. Although Raju rejects Lee Shin's obstinate nature, he respects him more than he does Jimmy, the new breed of Chinese businessmen. Jimmy is not interested in the land he buys. He thinks that by buying land, he owns it and will thus be successful in becoming part of the nation. Raju rejects his old self because he no longer shares Jimmy's worldview. Raju has to strike out of the land brokerage company that has given him a comfortable life to get to know the "far country" that is his home.

Anne Brewster, in discussing Maniam's earlier novel *The Return*, employs Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyglossia to explain Maniam's use of multiple voices in the novel (Bennet 175). As a strategy to approach nationhood, Maniam does the same in his second novel. He employs, as Brewster argues, the "discursive tradition of the European tradition and the dialogic voice of the post-colonial writer" (175). Here, however, Maniam challenges the landscape itself. If linguistics is what Brewster claims Maniam struggles against in *The Return*, it is the authoritative landscape of Malaysia that Raju deconstructs in *A Far Country*. The task at hand is to move out of the "spatial" boundaries that have been set up by national culture, and Maniam attempts to do this in his second novel. Travelling back to meet his Malay friend Zulkifi, Raju comes face to face with the very beast of the Malaysian jungle – the tiger. In the jungle with Zulklifi, Raju discovers that he is losing himself:

> Time ceased to matter as we were led into the interior. I could hardly recall the town where I had my office. The dusty labyrinth of streets, walled

> in by buildings, seemed to have lost all its history. Every little gesture I had made in walking those streets became foreign to me. I seemed to have entered a bubble that shut out my sense of past.
>
> (97)

However as Raju begins to realise that he has to assimilate, to lose his past in order to blend in, he decides to withdraw. For Maniam, though the country of origin is now the far country, it is still part of the immigrant's heritage. Just as Jimmy tries to acquire land, the land can overwhelm and destroy the immigrant. As Raju confesses, "[you] cannot surrender your self to be the other self [...] the chant poured out of Zulkifi's throat like an ageless invitation to disown whatever I was and to merge with the tiger. I didn't wait for that to happen" (101). Bogged down by the assimilationist chants that seem almost complicit with the jungle landscape, Raju's inability to carve for himself a place is perhaps reflective of the impregnable forces of "national culture".

Yet Raju is still on a quest to find belonging. Raju returns to his dream of childhood, to the rubber estate that is part of Malaysia's fabric but also the ghetto of the Malaysian Indian. Like in *The Return*, the rubber estate is a created landscape and, some might add, a legacy of British colonialism. It marks out the Malaysian Indian as an immigrant and therefore as an alien to the landscape. Yet it represents a balance between what has been brought into the country and what the country has nurtured. It is by returning to his "natural" landscape that Maniam finds an answer to the tiger. Maniam literally wills a national myth for the Indian immigrants. Just as Fernando's landscape is the university campus and the world of ideas, Maniam's myth is bound up with the rubber estate and Mani the goat. It is in dreaming up a national myth that Maniam finds a national identity and once Raju discovers this he can find belonging:

> I am part of an incomprehensible flow, which will soon be lost to human eyes. The currents are coming from a mystical source but uncorrupted by the habits of my family and society has instilled in me. I see light. It is the light of pure living. It is there shining all around and into me. There is no ego, no self interest, no loyalty to all the people I've known; only the desire to contain the light within me and take it out to the world...for it is the vitality that keeps discovering; not the lack of stamina that keeps man enslaved as a family, a culture and a country. It is the light of total responsibility to life.
>
> (153)

"Spatial nations" within the nation state

Evaluating the strategies employed by the two authors reveals how each contests the post-1969 definition of national identity. Fernando chooses to intellectualise and to appeal for the establishment of a French-inspired egalitarian proposition of citizenship and thus, by extension, argues for a democratic definition of national identity. However even the French model promotes hegemonic "French" culture that excludes minorities like Algerian Arabs or Carribbean islanders. If assimilation is to be rejected, can the artificial racial balance promoted by Panglima be the gel that holds the nation together? Fernando thinks not and exposes this through his other mouthpiece in the novel, Sara. At the end of the novel, Sara confronts Panglima:

> 'All along your loyalty to the nation – was it a sham?'
>
> 'No. True loyalty. I saw how the so-called modern values have led us to the situation that we are in now. The people divided, so many religions, real rojak, partitioned not into two parts but many parts. We need a single set of values to keep us together.'
>
> 'So you took away our rights and allowed others to become power-mad. Why did you hide?'
>
> He said, 'We are too few yet. The people aren't ready – or interested. But we kept those in power off balance by what we did. Dahlan spoiled it all.'
>
> 'What Dahlan did was selfless. He is our conscience.'
>
> (182-83)

Panglima's policies are therefore congruent with British Imperial policies of keeping the races separate by authoritarian means. But perhaps at some level, Fernando must have realised that a democratic definition of national identity is but a utopia. Maniam in a rare article on Malaysian writers calls Fernando's style "artificial detachment" (Bennet 171). To him a novel like *Green* sets up an objective and by extension works towards overcoming a sense of exile by deliberately working towards that objective. Many critics of Fernando's work notice how allegorical his characters seem to be and how it is a novel of ideas rather than an organic work. In reference to both Fernando and his own approach, Maniam explains the different types of Malaysians who write in English:

> The first part of literary reality suggest [sic] an inability on the part of the writer to move beyond the cultural boundaries his community marks

> out. The second adopts an objective, if on occasion an artificial detachment. In attempting to project common myths, beliefs and history, the work does not create an alternative credible world. The third bypasses communal concerns and comes nearer to satisfying the fulfilment the writer seeks in his vocation. It is in the third kind of writer and work that there lives a more comprehensive framework through which to achieve cultural transcendence.
>
> (171)

Undoubtedly Maniam attempts to transcend cultural boundaries despite being painfully aware that finding common myths, beliefs and a history can make one's work artificial. Yet it is through an integrationist strategy that Maniam has been able to transcend, at least as far as Raju does in *Far Country*, the narrow confines of race. Raju returns to the town house aware that his identity is bound up in the land though not Zulkifli's but his own rubber estate "jungle". Here the myth of Mani the goat explored at the end of the novel takes on deeper tones of understanding. The sacrifice of Mani haunts Ravi's dreams and at one point, the goat takes on human attributes. One can easily associate Mani as the replacement "myth" for the tiger, for the goat now represents the rubber estates and can claim to be part of the "spatial" identity of Malaysian Indians. If his characters can have visibility and be acknowledged for this physical landscape, then they have forced the nation to acknowledge them. Thus one myth from the rubber estate has escaped the confines of its physical boundary to invade the national consciousness. Although one can choose to see the Mani myth as evidence of Ravi's failure to find belonging in his new nation and say that there is no place for Mani in the "jungles" of national culture, one can also say that Mani is a symbol of a people located between cultures.

Similarly Yun Ming and Gita in *Green* realise that compromises have to be made to fit into the new Malaysia. While Dahlan and Omar have the luxury of being pro-western or pro-Islam, the immigrants are constantly under the surveillance of Panglima. The immigrants have to prove themselves loyal by either accepting their second-class position in society or leaving for greener pastures like Yun Ming's brother who migrates to Australia. For the immigrants, being alienated is a shaping force that encourages them to work against prescribed ideas on national identity. Marginality is what makes immigrant societies around the world vibrant for we are constantly reminded that though the country may be green, it is still the far country that marks us out as different and as the other. Like the characters in these novels, migrants live under contrived conditions

imposed by a hegemonic national culture. Thus while both novels are undoubtedly influenced by their writers' colonial past, both are expressing contemporary concerns, via the marginality that defines their characters – namely the dispossession due to national cultural policies. Fernando and Maniam's works demonstrate an attempt to disrupt the hegemony of "national culture" and challenge it by describing points of view from within the multi-cultural space of the nation.

Notes

[1] Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia (independent in 1957), Sarawak & Sabah (independent 1963). The writers referred to in this paper are from Peninsular Malaysia and continue in the tradition of what can be considered Malaysian literature in English. Both works were published in 1993, about 24 years after the 1969 race riots that brought about the fall of the government of Tunku Abdul Rahman and the establishment of Malay political hegemony in Malaysia. The Tunku's book of memoirs, *May 13: Before and After* (1969), provides an interesting window into the various political undercurrents that prevailed at the time. The Tunku blames the opposition parties for inciting the Malays but also points to the growing demands of the "Malay Ultras" for a Malay dominated Malaysia. The subsequent suspension of parliament and setting up of the National Action Council saw the shaping of the "Rukunegara" which contained the tenets of the new "nation". The MCA withdrawal from government due to its poor performance is a factor which contributed to the National Action Council's Malay-dominated policies that eventually resulted in the National Cultural Policy of 1972. Today Malays make up 55% of the population while ethnic Chinese constitute 25%, followed by Indians at 10%. The other minorities are categorised under the term "others".

[2] Leela Gandhi discusses contestations by minority communities in postcolonial nations in her *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. In it she explains that the colonial encounter is an "adversarial confrontation between two competing nationalisms i.e. European nationalism leading to colonialism and counter energies of anti-colonialism"(124). This marks the early phase of the independence struggle when postcolonial nations sought to establish a credible national culture. In Malaysia this nationalist struggle became most apparent consequent to the May 13 riots and resulted in the establishment of the National Culture Policy in the 1970s. The very idea of a national cultural policy - in which case, the cultural practices of the dominant race dominate - is slowly being challenged by minority communities.

[3] The *Malay Annals* was composed by Tun Sri Lanang and is a court chronicle about the myths associated with the Malays especially during the Malaccan Sultanate (1400-1511). It was written sometime during the 16th century and thus predates Malaya or Malaysia. However it has since become a "national" myth due to the hegemony of Malay culture in the country. Malaysians generally accept this text as part of their "national" heritage but it is obviously limited by its own historical boundaries.

[4] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–223.

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Politics of the Deformed Body/Space in Adib Khan's *The Storyteller*

Andrew Ng Hock Soon

In this essay, I wish to deploy theories of deformity and space to read Adib Khan's novel about a raconteur dwarf. I want to show how deformity (and any other form of the body) is embedded within space, especially space as social construction (in this case, the city) and how this body must be resignified to escape confinement or become subsumed by the ideological metanarrative of that space. I must admit at the outset that this essay is not about postcolonial politics in textual strategies, but rather a mixture of western cultural theories of bodies and space to read a postcolonial text. My interest is how space defines and confines the body, and how the body can "escape" this confining space, not by supplanting the body physically from that space, but by recasting or resignifying the body *within* that space. As this essay will show, one such method of resignification is precisely through language and imagination.

This essay will begin with a discussion of how bodies are constructed, and that there are certain bodies, because they defy concepts of the beautiful and the normal, are immediately marked as marginal. I will appropriate Judith Butler's views of gender construction to read the "inhuman" body to show how bodies are constructed based on exclusionary means in which what is normal is built on and against what is abnormal. Also, in locating the body within the space of a city, I will argue that what is perceived as normal has to do with the way space shapes bodies. That is, bodies which fulfil certain functions within that space will be deemed acceptable, whereas bodies which do not will be effectively policed and curtailed. This is the space of a certain form of ideology which influences all who inhabit it. Yet, interestingly, within this similar space is the vitally alive space of the unconscious which permits an alternative existence to the said same city dwellers, and which, bodies that do not matter in the light of the ideologically conscious space, can thrive in this

dark space of the ideological unconscious. Following this, and for the rest of this essay, I will show how being inhuman, that is, embodying the liberating unconscious life of the city, can relocate Vamana (especially, but not exclusively) "elsewhere" in urban spatiality. I will look at the various technologies of resignification that these inhumans deploy to resist becoming subsumed by the metanarrative/mythic construct of urban normalcy, and how these various technologies are all, and finally, located in the body. Finally, I will conclude the essay with a meditation on Richard Sennet's and Elaine Scarry's views of the body in pain – as the deformed body is - and its relevance to community and spatiality.

The Storyteller is set in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, and the tale opens with Vamana the dwarf in jail, reminiscing about how he got there in the first place[1]. Chandni Chowk is a city aestivating in its own filth:

> The glory of Chandni Chowk exists now only in the mind. All that remains are tottering warehouses, dilapidated shops and the permanent stink of piss. The centre of the bazaar is permanently clogged with people and stray animals. It is not the age of tyrannical emperors riding on their imperial elephants and Arabian stallions decorated with precious stones and laden with chains of gold and silver. There are traffic jams and routine accidents. Smog. Dust and fumes. The exhalation of a dying city.
>
> (14)

Here, while the mind continues to register a glorious version of the city, bodies have become powerfully engrafted onto a decadent urban spatiality. On a single metonymic plain, buildings and human waste (piss) are grafted onto each other, and humans and animals are regarded on a similar textual level. The city becomes personified, even as persons become objectified – both become crude materiality, with the city predominant. Bodies are semiotic presence in the city-as-text, standing as indexes for what the city is and how the city should be read. But it is not the body which, in the end, marks the meaning of the city, but the other way around. The city embodies a certain mythic vitality that powerfully influences its inhabitants, making it more than "just" spatial. In other words, the city has, as Steve Pile surmises, an "unconscious life,"[2] which can be both repressive and liberating. It is this "unconscious life" of the city that continues to define which bodies should belong and which ought to be ejected. In the case of Delhi, the historical weight of the city (royal and wealthy) will continue to draw strict grids of insides and outsides. The "unconscious life" of the city distinguishes the normal from the abnormal,

and the latter becomes subjected to various guises of repression and marginalisation within that space. As a dwarf, Vamana is one of those abnormal bodies. The judge prefacing his trial at the beginning of the novel announces that "this ancient city must be purged of all its undesirables" (19). Here, it is clear that the ideology of normalcy is defined by space. The deformed – and hence, abnormal – body is considered "undesirable" within a strict ideological grid of the city, and must be extricated from that space. There is a powerful reference to the policing of space here, and how certain bodies are not welcomed to inhabit that space. Bodies which do not conform, that is, bodies which do not fulfil particular functions of either sociological (as in tramps and prostitutes) or aesthetical (the deformed) purposes are immediately marked for marginalisation and purgation. But purgation here does not mean complete removal, as in the case with the *Hijras*, for these bodies are still necessary in some limited ways, and if only for policing purposes. Indeed, the city space becomes thoroughly confining to these marked bodies, forcing them to exist on a cramped threshold that would not allow them a presence within (the city) or without (so that they can be monitored).

Vamana's dwarfish size is an anomaly within the city's ideology of the normal. His presence challenges that historically glorious space which marks the unconscious of the city: "I am angered by the way he keeps referring to me as a midget, dwarf, pigmy, as though size were my only identity" (13). But size is not the only thing that deforms Vamana:

> My body – that wretched arrangement of torso and limbs – refused to conform to the standards of physical normality. The hump on my back could no longer be hidden under loose-fitting clothes. I hobbled noticeably, especially when I attempted to run. As for my face ... I looked like the victim of an acid attack. The skin was broken and bumpy, resembling a devastated landscape covered with sporadic patches of brown, black and pink. Small deep-set eyes. Thick, scaly lips and a bulbous nose. Crooked teeth and abnormally sized canines. A square chin touched the upper part of the chest. I forgave people for thinking I was born without a neck. Floppy ears, as though in the original design I should have been an elephant. An unusually large and hard head matted with wiry, black hair. Not what you might call an endearing appearance. Everything about me resembled the remnants of a savage storm – torn, broken and decaying.
>
> (36)

Vamana is a freak, a monster. Bodies are constructed based on how beautiful, viable and useful they are to their spatial surrounding, which

include cultural and social topographies. Vamana's body obviously confounds whatever ideal body symmetry which engenders beauty and form. Not only is he short, he is also bodily deformed and awkward in gait. But it must be emphasised also that the beautiful body, or the normal body, is in itself not something *a priori*, but a constructed thing. What Vamana's body challenges is precisely that constructed idea of the body beautiful which, in time, settles in the politics of the ideological and the aesthetical as normal. In this case, what is deemed the normal body is really, as Judith Butler posits, "a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter."[3] Punning on the word "matter," normalcy are bodies that matter, whilst deformed or abnormal bodies are those which do not, and hence become peripheral. It is no wonder Vamana dwells in a slum area of Chandni Chawk, a *bustee*, which comprises "ramshackle structures to shelter the destitute.... Like the lines on the palm of a hand, a network of dirt paths branched out in different directions, most of then ending in front of rubbish dumps" (65). It is a place of human abjection, a dwelling for unwanted matters like prostitutes, pimps, petty thieves and diseased bodies. These are the undesirable bodies which, like the unconscious, cannot be completely purged from the conscious life of the city, and will continue to threaten the fixed boundaries of that which matters. For although most of the *bustee*'s vistas end in rubbish heaps, not all of them do; they reach out, and even penetrate the boundary which keeps the abnormal out.

The unconscious life of the city, in this case, becomes a strategy for resignification and retaliation, and as Pile admits (in a different context), this unconscious city life "carries out a guerrilla warfare with attempts to repress it: in other words, administrative rationality continually struggles to impose an order on people's everyday urban spatial practices, but must always fail."[4] The Delhi administration (as represented by the Judge and the police) persistently deploys law to restrict and subjugate the movements of the *bustee* dwellers, but is always thwarted. For example, Vamana's body and stories are forever inviting apprehension by the police, but he always manages to evade arrest, at least for most part of the novel, and returns often to similar spots to resume his tale-telling. Employing his small size, he hides cleverly within the *bustee*, thwarting the law's confining power over him. His, and the other bodies of the *bustee*, by virtue of their abjectness, reveal the regimes of the normal in denying them a presence. They serve as the foil for the "normal" matters to show how

they are rendered so because they are defined on exclusionary means which deny certain bodies as normal, and hence, human. Their ability to resist becoming subsumed by the law is precisely an act of rejecting that binarism and to reclaim their humanness. Here, an appropriation of Butler's view of gender construction for a reading of bodily construction is helpful in elaborating my point.

> Indeed, the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation. Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that process the more and the less "human," the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These sites come to bound the "human" as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation.[5]

Butler sees gender as constructed based on inequality. The masculine is engendered as everything which the feminine is not. If the masculine embodies rationality, strength, intelligence and power, the feminine must necessarily represent irrationality, weakness, frail-mindedness and submissiveness. This would inevitably lead to the barring of women from participating actively in "cultural articulation." Yet, what is obvious is that this entire dialectics of gender is founded on dependence on how the dominant gender idealises the subordinate gender, and how the latter must be inveigled or compelled into viewing this dialectics as natural. In other words, the whole culture of a dominant and a subordinate gender is based on a construction which each must, either willingly or unwillingly, made to comply. In the same way, the concept of the bodies which matter and do not are based on a construction which either must conform. As Butler argues, what is normal is defined based on a recurrent fear of what is *not* normal, and through various technologies of control and repression, effaces the abnormal from the realm of the human and silences it. But the inhuman continues to "disrupt" and "rearticulate," using certain technologies of their own. Vamana the inhuman will continue to "disrupt" the *status quo* of acceptability to signify his humanness. He is inhuman, a "human" who must be prefixed by a lack, but human nevertheless.

Although Delhi carries with it a burden of history, it has also a different kind of existence. After calling Delhi a "dying city" (14), Vamana questions whether Delhi can "ever die?" and goes on to surmise that:

> It is protected by *djinns*. And the storytellers have not disappeared. It is a precious and ancient crown that I have inherited. Delhi, without stories told by word of mouth, would be a desert stirred by a melancholy wind. Despite the ridicule of my appearance, people are curious about me. After they laugh, they listen.
>
> (14)

If one reads Vamana's deformed body as allegorical, he would then represent the body of the city of Delhi most accurately. Delhi, like Vamana, are two bodies which share that certain decadence sustained by constructions of language. Chandni Chawk's atrocity – its "smell of offal, urine, stale cooking oil and poverty" (68) – is opposed by the memory of its historicity – "the pride of Moghul opulence" (68) - which Vamana realises, is what finally sustains the city. And how is this memory reiterated but through language? Ultimately, the officialdom of Delhi continues to pride itself in the city's past glory purely by resurrecting a story of Delhi. It is a story of wealth, royalty and opulence, a monological story which political ideology etches and reinforces in the minds of the dwellers of the city to remind them of their proud "normalcy." But this story is ultimately a veneer to mask what is obvious. Stories are preferable to reality, a strategy Vamana knows too well and hence, exploits; for as Vamana admits, even as people laugh at him, they are curious and would listen. Hence, even as people realises the absurdity of the physical space of Delhi, they continue to desire the memory of it sustained in and by language.

And like Delhi, Vamana too is shrouded in myth. People are afraid of, and at the same time, fascinated by him. He "knew that a number of men were aching to give me a thrashing. They were restrained by the superstition that dwarfs had magical powers to create mischief. I was delighted with the effectiveness of the rumour that Vamana was privy to the secret of an ancient curse that rendered men impotent" (179). Here, both in Delhi and the dwarf, fact and fiction become confused, leaving a tale (twice) told which signifies nothing beyond what the story holds. At his trial, Vamana is met with this accusation:

> Fact and fiction collided, merging into a concoction of exaggerations. I was a corruptive influence on those who listened to me. There had to be an insidious force within me, something that compelled me to fabricate such immoral and seditious tales. Did I ever feel guilty?
>
> (20)

Vamana's guilt is to tell stories of "indecency" and "abnormality," that is, according to the criteria of officialdom. For what are his tales but those of "[m]utilated beggar children. Diseased prostitutes. A man with...with, ah...oversized organs.... [i]nfanticide ... fornicating priests. Incest" (21). Confronted with this litany of indecencies, the judge finally questions Vamana: "Have you ever told a decent story? About love? Loyalty? An act of courage? Nobility? Anything about *normal* life and *ordinary* people? ... I suppose not, judging by your sorry appearance" (21, my emphasis). Of course, Vamana is telling tales about "normal" life and "ordinary" people, but those of his world and experience, which in the eyes of officialdom, would be classified as abnormal and less than ordinary. But, as in the final pronouncement of the judge, Vamana's kind of normalcy and ordinariness are not acceptable by official ideology. Vamana is a threat not only because he tells monstrous tales, but because he is himself a monster. Unlike his fellow *bustee* dwellers, who keep to their marginal world and operate within close confinement, Vamana dares to cross the threshold which separates what is acceptable from what is not. He inhabits both worlds, tittering on the fine line that distinguishes, embracing the threshold. Monsters are said to be "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions."[6] In Vamana's case, although everyone else sees him as monstrous, and he does as well, he knows that he is also human:

> What am I? Everything that is foul and enchanting. I live in poverty and among filth and decay. I dream of the beautiful and I also defecate in the streets. I am a composite of blood, sweat and semen. Flesh and hair. I hurt and can be happy. I can hate intensely and yearn for love. I am human! do you understand that ..... What am I? Deformed and hideous? Yes. But human and alive.
>
> (31)

It is this constant need to assert his humanity that finally makes Vamana a threatening presence. As monsters are liminal creatures whose existence borders on both the normal and abnormal worlds, their refusal to be "structured" and classified causes an upheaval in the status quo of normalcy because what is considered normal is suddenly blown to pieces by this presence which is neither normal nor abnormal. Normalcy is shown to be a mere veneer, a thin layer of collective fantasy which hides the reality of chaos. Normalcy, order, beauty are finally all forms of

constructions, and hence, can be torn down and reconfigured. This is the fear, the fear that what is normal is really nothing at all.

Space and body in this case become fantasy sites. Both are constituted in and built on language.[7] While Delhi's political ideology speaks one language (and tells one story), Vamana constructs a different ideology by telling another, alternative tale. Vamana understands the power of language and the preference of memory over reality, and so he devises a counter strategy which utilises the same tool of the officialdom – language. This may be read as a Bakhtinian dialogic and carnivalesque play of language in which the monological language of the officialdom becomes undermined and overturned by the language of the bawd and indecent to engage it in a dialogue. But unlike Bakhtin's carnival theory, there is no momentary allowance by officialdom for such a play here. Vamana is marked by the law which seeks to forcefully silence him because he engages in a dialogical excursion. Defying the mythic quality of the city with his tale, he must learn to negotiate his presence in the city in order to remain in it and escape it at the same time – embodying precisely that liminal existence which characterises monstrosity. Earlier, if Vamana allegorises the city with his body by representing Delhi's actual physicality, here, Vamana must de-mythify the city by representing Delhi's actual story. Vamana is not the only storyteller in Khan's novel, but officialdom as well which perpetrates the repressive version of the political unconscious story of the city. This latter tale must be countered. It is not that this tale is false or wrong (for in all myths, there are elements of truths) but its persistence in relaying incorrect ideals of exclusionary normalcy which marginalises the poor, the deformed and the alleged deviant that must be overcome. To do this, Vamana must embrace the invisibility of the city, that is, the story of the city that is never heard or told. Just as his tale rejects the official version of Delhi, he must inhabit that "other" side of Delhi which escapes the surveillance of officialdom. It is not the *bustee* I am referring to, because the *bustee* is a place set up by officialdom to confine and monitor the abject humans. It is darkness:

> But there was always the irritation of dawn. Everything that mattered had to be submerged and hidden from the tyranny of daylight....Old Delhi was now my home. I had become adept at merging with the shadows when the police vans passed by. I became the night. Slippery. Transitory. They began to ask for me – the thieves, pimps, beggars, drug dealers and whores.
>
> (53)

In darkness, Vamana becomes invisible even as the city loses its visual concreteness. Here, the body and the city cannot be told apart, separated. No official ideology can pluck the abnormal from the myth-of-the-normal city because both are lost in shadows. At night, the city remains, but is inhabited by a different panoply of bodies. But Vamana does not say that he comes out at night. He says that he becomes night – literally embodying the city's invisibility – to remain within the city and escape it. However, he does admit that it is at night time that his stories work best:

> It was always more difficult to create a complete story during daylight when I was reduced to the abjectness of making a living. At night I became an apothecary who prepared potions to nourish illusions. I sought to induce dreams, purge illnesses and implant hope. Listeners paid for their sustenance, but they never asked what it was that compelled me to create such murky worlds and populate them with human oddities – you know, the type of people I might have fathered. I preferred it that way. I gave the impression of being wise, the custodian of the answers to complex riddles. The truth was that I did not understand the origins of the interior landscapes or the details of their features. All I knew was that they had always been there – clear pools and running streams, swamps and treacherous rivers, dark forests teeming with life, creatures that naked eyes could not bear to see. There were voices that belonged to wounded monsters, flashes of blinding light, that shady areas and purple shadows. Darkness...darkness where I belonged.
>
> (206 – 7)

I quote the passage at length because several important readings can be made. Vamana's stories work best at night because they can then take on the quality and semblance of dreams. As dreams are manifestations of the unconscious, so stories told in the night reveal the unconscious life of the city profoundly. To tell his stories at night is to create dreams of sustenance that can cure and give hope. Yet, what is interesting is that these stories of sustenance are not happy or "normal" stories about "ordinary people" but stories of "murky worlds" populated with "human oddities" (21). It is as if listening to these monstrous tales sustains the fantastical veneer of normalcy in daylight, the unconscious sustaining the conscious, the abnormal sustaining the normal. This brings together my earlier points of how cities are supported by an unconscious life and how the normal is always preceded by the abnormal which the former subsequently excludes. Vamana's tales, in this case then, are "potions to nourish illusions," and this does not mean that his tales are illusions.

The "human oddities" in his tales fascinate his listeners because they (the listeners) can both safely remain distanced from abnormality and cling on to their normalcy, and at the same time identify with the abnormal without losing their normalcy. Being shrouded in darkness, these listeners can safely entertain their abnormality (why else would they wish to listen to these tales if they do not themselves realise how absurd and unreal their daylight order and normalcy are?) without becoming exposed to the gaze of others and officialdom. Vamana's tales have no origin; they simply exist, and "normalcy" is eventually derived from it. That is why they are fascinating, necessary, both beautiful and terrible.

Storytelling then, or rather, language, is one form of resisting confinement. Being considered inhuman, Vamana uses a human tool and stands it on its head to both challenge the monologic of the Delhi political officialdom and (indirectly) assert his own humanness. But language is not the only tool. The city, which in its daylight physicality, rejects the likes of Vamana, becomes friendly in its shadow and darkness. The city hides and protects Vamana and allows him to spin his counter-tale. If, on one hand, the deformed body is rejected by the space he dwells, on the other, this body can also be incorporated by that space on a different level. This space which is resignified even as it remains unchanged physically is what French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray, terms an "elsewhere."[8] The city does not physically change at night, but is transformed to a different world where alternative kinds of bodies can exist. The city, in this sense, becomes a monster itself because it incorporates and embodies alternative, even contradictory versions of its stories – the daylight one of normalcy and officialdom, and the night time tale of abnormality and resistance. The city is neither the place of official ideology or carnival counter-ideology, but both. Vamana's monstrous body is again an accurate allegorical representation of Delhi even though he can only exist in shadows. But shadows are precisely that dark spot in day light, even as Vamana is that dark spot in Delhi's law, showing that in the end, the monster cannot be confined and structured in limitation, but will resist and defy that confinement and move fluidly in and out of the two spaces. Vamana and Delhi are both split bodies/spaces.

Bodies then, can be coded, constructed and confined, or can be manipulated to retaliate such a limited construction. Vamana is coded as monstrous, but instead of identifying with that code's limitation, he seeks to exploit his body in defiance to that construction. But of course, Vamana has not always known how to do this. Recalling his younger days when

he was in school, he remembers how his deformity almost caused him to yield to the confinement of his being in the "normal" world of others:

> To be treated as a presence that deserved to be ignored, destroyed any semblance of pride I might have felt about being a person. Darkness shrouded my stunted body and withered all sense of personal worthiness. I surrendered to an immediate impulse and sought shelter in an unpopulated grove.
>
> (39)

Here, Vamana has yet learned to manipulate the power of darkness, but instead, has almost succumbed to that numbing darkness of his self worthlessness. He has yet learned to understand the capacity of his own body to retaliate and be resignified elsewhere. That running away to seek shelter is like the majority of the *bustee* dwellers who have yielded defeat and now seek solace in this marginal place which exists to persistently reiterate their rejection. It is in school that Vamana first learns of his monstrosity and it is especially through stories that he does so: "Later, Miss DeSouza read to us. Stories about wise children and vanquished ogres who had my silent sympathy. Happy endings. Angelic faces and rapturous expressions" (39). Fairy tales are powerful forms of ideological formation; they transfer certain embodiments of cultural and social codes to their young listeners so that these listeners imbibe into themselves notions of normalcy, acceptability and appropriateness. In other words, the fairy tale is a "carrier of ideology."[9] Vamana sympathises with the ogre because he identifies with the ogre, and hence, learns to see himself as monstrous, and by extension, evil and abject. It is only much later, after leaving school and running away from his family (another confining institution that panders powerfully to a monologic ideology), that Vamana eventually learns how to negotiate his deformity for his own benefit and to his own ends. This, he first learns, interestingly, from another deformed body – the *hijra*, Farida Baji.

In certain ways, the *hijra*'s body is more monstrous than the dwarf's. If the dwarf's body is a physical aberration in the normal world, the *hijra*'s is a gender aberration as well. The *hijra* is indeed a "monster" in that he truly embodies the elsewhere by living on the margins.[10] He is neither male nor female, but represents a difficult composite of bodies which defy classification. Masculinity revolves around the phallus (which is not necessarily represented by the penis, but often has been) which must, paradoxically, remain veiled and hidden in order to exert its power. This

is because the phallus is, according to Slavoj Žižek, an index which substitutes the lack which it represents[11]. This Lacanian notion of the lack has variegated significations, and indeed, much has been made of this theory, but it fundamentally stands for the loss of the object of desire. The masculine identity is formed, so the theory goes, on that loss of the maternal other which it then screens off by constructing fantasies to support the powerful desire for this loss.[12] One such fantasy is the masculine power represented by the phallic symbol, which, as mentioned, must remain unseen in order to be powerful. For once exposed, it will signal its own impossibility of and reveal that lack which it is merely substituting. As Žižek goes on to argue:

> In its (the phallus) very positivity it is the signifier of 'castration' – that is, of its own lack. The so-called pre-phallic objects (breast, excrement) are lost objects, while the phallus is not simply lost but is an object which *gives body to a certain fundamental loss in its very presence. In the phallus, loss as such attains a positive existence.*[13]

If we take Lacan's and Žižek's reading of masculine superiority to be based on its phallic significance, as this essay does, then the entire foundation of masculine dominance is indeed fragile, and reveals instead, that gender and all its alleged power and significance are merely constructions. In this case, the *hijra* indeed poses a powerful threat to the masculine hegemony because he visibly represents the fragility of gender constructions. He is the male who has lost his penis (physically castrated) and subsequently has become the other of man – woman – a condition feared by a very regimented hegemony of masculine "normalcy" in terms of their sexual and gender place and role. The *hijra* is an abject in the Kristevan sense because he truly embodies his "mother" by relinquishing that fantasy of masculinity to embrace that desire for the lost maternal other. Another facet to the *hijra*'s monstrosity is also his ability to mimic the masculine fantasy of the phallus by performing the veiling technique:

> I [Vamana] had heard that she flashed herself at parties. But that, I concluded, was intended to bluff, shock and embarrass people into giving her troupe of singers and dancers more food and money. At heart she was quite a puritan. When she bathed, a tarpaulin screened the area around the well, and a couple of *hijras* stood on guard. I was frequently told to wear more clothes and not expose myself quite as much as I did.
>
> (113)

The *hijra*, once "male," continues to play that role even after he has

relinquished it in only one sense: he continues to hide the phallus. It is never clear whether the *hijra* is completely castrated or not, and herein lies his ability to manipulate the unseen phallus to his own ends: that is, to exert a certain power. Because it is never clearly established whether Farida Baji has the phallus or not, he cannot be completely rejected as male. But physically and behaviour-wise, the *hijra* manifests all that is feminine, and hence, he cannot be considered masculine. This fourfold gender and sexual complexity - male but not masculine, feminine but not female; a feminine male, and a masculine female – makes the *hijra* a truly monstrous embodiment indeed.

It is Farida Baji who first acknowledges Vamana's monstrous body *and* gives him a space within the city. But it is not without cruel intimidation and certain personal gains:

> 'No!' She looked at him sharply. 'Repulsive as he is, Vamana has a place among us. He is a freak. An accident. A hellish creature transported to this life by mistake. His body is the Devil's work. His mind is an inferno. He spends his hours burning in his own fire. See how he grins! He shelters demons inside him. Use him in some way.'
>
> (62)

Performing what Jonathan Dollimore would designate as discrimination based on a "hierarchy of the subordinate,"[14] Farida Baji condescendingly remarks on Vamana's deformity, forgetting that he is deformed himself. He can do this because society has allowed the *hijras* a form of peripheral existence where they can make a living by playing a useful function in that society. *Hijras* are invited to weddings to dance and sing as this is considered lucky. The *hijras* then, are an aberration which society uncomfortably admits. In fact, weddings can make or break depending on how well the *hijras* are treated, giving them also a certain form of power. But every once in a while, the *hijras* are reminded of their inhumanity – a condition they embody but sometimes forget – for which the *hijras* would then retaliate.[15] Like Vamana, the monstrous *hijra* is surrounded with mythic authority and quality which give him a certain semblance of power and mystery. But unlike Vamana, the *hijra* has been granted a place in society. This place allows Farida Baji to discriminate against Vamana and blinds himself to his own abnormality. In this place, Farida Baji earns an income and lawfully exists. But this place, as in the *bustee*, is ultimately a confinement. As an aberration, Farida Baji can only exist by becoming a spectacle. He must exhibit himself as the "excluded aberrant" to satisfy

others of their normalcy. In other words, Baji must be seen so that gradations of normalcy can be defined. This is a disservice which Baji does to himself and his disciples, because in their position, they can never escape their limitations and their negatively coded bodies. They will always be read as deformed and abnormal, no matter how much they try to resist them by ignoring or hiding. Even as the *hijras* first teach Vamana to see his body as powerfully coded, they themselves remain confined. Baji accepts Vamana because he sees Vamana's body as "useful" – that is, another body to be used for economic reasons. Money – the symbol of male hegemony and masculine economy and politics – has become Baji's main form of confinement. But Vamana escapes this by refusing to play the submissive body whose function is to make money. If Vamana has learned anything from the *hijras*, it is that his body is indeed monstrous, but not limited or compromised. He has witnessed that the body has liberating potentials if carefully manipulated (as in the incident in which the *hijras* "hit back" at an unreasonable wedding host, see note 12). His clever merging with the invisible city and his re-imagining of his body through tales told of which he is the hero are two forms of this resignification of the body as liberating.

In the hierarchy and politics of discrimination, Vamana, in the end, finds himself without friends or a defined space. Vamana's ability to negotiate his body to penetrate boundaries and cross thresholds aligns him with neither the dominant political ideology nor the space of the marginal. His monstrosity then, is not so much his deformed body but his *ability to use that body to defy confinement*. Khan's novel is about monstrous bodies, and certainly, Vamana and Farida Baji are two powerful epitomes of aberrant bodies. The two are set up to reflect and deflect one another. The *hijra* is a defeated monster because he has chosen to abide by the status quo of normalcy by remaining on the periphery and penetrating it only when allowed. He is the monster who has been "tamed" and thus, is allowed a form of existence as a spectacle and a subtle foil of his other's normalcy. He has, in other words, allowed himself to be placed in the position of the "gazed at," a powerless position in which others can project their fear of the other onto, and transcribe within a limited and negative code of subjectivity. Vamana, the storytelling dwarf, on the other hand, is the monster who "gazes" back; refusing to be confined in his *bustee*, he ventures out into the city's invisible space and there, wreaks havoc amongst his listeners and incites a counter-story and re-imagining of the body in the city. He exemplifies the hidden unconscious of the listeners

who hear in him the voice of the liberator. Through his stories, he tells of a different Delhi, not one masked by a lost fantasy of glory and opulence, but of the utopia of friendship, community and acceptance:

> But then how often had I told people that it was the way we chose to see and treat life beyond the obvious – to create fantasies of desires and to frequent worlds where there was an acceptance of the inexplicable – that determined meaning and thwarted despair? For those like me, who were scornful of the reality perceived by the senses, the manipulation of belief was essential.
>
> (293)

Vamana's stories are counter-fantasies where the 'normal' standards and practices of everyday life are not applicable. His stories are not just a form of catalyst for his pain to be released, but a kind of tranquilliser for himself and his listeners to temporarily escape the conscious misery and poverty of their real world. Yet sadly, night time always proves too short and the alternative dreams of the city inhabitants end with the coming of dawn. Like the Bakhtinian carnivalesque which only endures temporarily when officialdom lets down its guard, Vamana's magical tales vanish into the busyness and illusion of the Delhi daylight normalcy.

In the end, Vamana the dwarf becomes a hunted monster for his pyromaniac act against the premises of Chandni Chawk's overseer and bully, the Jhunjhun Wallah, and his threat to hurt this man for the demolition of the *bustee* (initially carried out both as an act to flush Vamana out, and to remove this marginal space in favour of a "modern Delhi" of "shops, cinemas, offices and restaurants"(321). He is betrayed by almost all whom he calls friends, including Farida Baji, who compromises Vamana in exchange for his (Baji's) own safety and protection. When Vamana confronts Baji, the latter openly admits to his lack of loyalty:

> I [Vamana] did not move. 'Jhunjhun Wallah destroyed the *bustee*.' Gulbadan stopped knitting and looked at me with a troubled face. 'My home. The wall and the tree. The entire community.'
>
> Baji squinted and smiled. A smile of satisfaction and immense cruelty. 'We were born to be destroyed.'
>
> 'He took what was mine.'
>
> 'Nothing in life can belong to anyone.' She sounded harsh and remote. 'Whatever we own has to be surrendered at some time.'
>
> It struck me that no one could possibly be close to Baji. She wasn't one person. Man, woman, saint, villain, God, Devil – they all possessed her.

> 'You betrayed me.'
>
> 'I betrayed *myself* a long time ago. What could be worse?'
>
> I left reluctantly, certain in the belief that I would not return. I walked on an ill-defined path between regret and resentment. She was a liar and a manipulator, someone who demonstrated generosity to delude herself and others into believing that hers was a noble and selfless spirit. And yet how could I forget her acts of kindness despite the darkness of her motives. (337 – 8, author's emphasis)

This profound dialogue between Vamana and Baji – a confrontation of monsters – is indeed a clear and interesting piece of juxtaposition in the novel. As already argued earlier in this essay, Baji exists as spectacle. He has sold himself to his spectators, and has, in the process, lost any form of authoritative subjectivity and meaning. His subjectivity is defined and coded by others. Lacking any form of personal self-worth, he will not hesitate to destroy others like him as a form of sublimating his own sense of emptiness and personal betrayal. As he states, he and his likes are "born to be destroyed," clearly indicating his relinquishing of an authoritative self. Vamana, on the other hand, refuses to become petrified by social coding of bodies. Every little space that is his – "the wall and the tree" – gives him a sense of community and of place. Unlike Baji, he will not passively give up this sense of place – which can be interpreted as that sense of subjective authority. Interestingly, he correctly surmises Baji's manifold identities as controlling ("possessing") him and not the other way around. Baji is *not* the shapeshifter; it is the shapes that shift him. He yields to whatever local circumstances desire of him in order to keep safe, protected and fed. He is, therefore, not in control of his own life, but merely donning different social and situational robes to fit in with his needs. He is truly a fragmented entity, fragmented not in the happy postmodern sense of refusing closure and embracing transformations for the better, but fragmented as in the loss of an essential, architectonic self that gives one a sense of place even in the persistent postmodern flux of subjective changes. Without an authoritative self, Baji is a depthless, empty being whose self is encoded in social and cultural constructions which he, in the end, is buried within. This is Baji's delusion – believing that he is "someone", when in the end, he is really no one.

The novel concludes with an irony. Sentenced to die, Vamana, at the eleventh hour, is released because his name has been mysteriously omitted from the court's list:

> 'What about the trial?' I asked impatiently. The other two prisoners

were taken earlier, perhaps yesterday.

'Your name wasn't on the court's list.' He laughs as if he has belatedly grasped a joke.

'You do not exist, except in this prison. This is like a independent country within a country. We have our own rules here. It would be so simple to let you out. Don't you wish to disappear in the night?'[16]

(303)

Vamana, who escapes from the consciousness of normalcy through language, finally finds freedom in an omission in language. Yet even so, his freedom has less to do with an official bungle then the fact that the self is represented by a sign – the name - which takes precedence over the signified which it represents. Vamana is released not because he has been declared innocent, but because his name is missing from the list. In this sense, Vamana is less important as a person than as a sign. The visible body in pain is less significant than a (missing) mark on the paper. This is perhaps the most powerful testimony of the total degradation of the human person in the city where official signs carry greater weight and authority than the body itself. Without a name, Vamana is no one, and does not exist. Vamana is released, only to fall into the hands of Jhunjhun Wallah's thugs who brutally beat him up and leave him to die. The final paragraph in the novel spells out the fate of monsters who gaze back:

Anxious faces and eager hands appear above him. They whisper and begin to shovel in the dirt. Faster...faster.

In the distance, a timeless city stirs to the rhythm of an ordinary day.

(355)

In the end, the monster is defeated and destroyed. There is no place in the city for deformed bodies because deformed bodies remind the city too much of its own deformity and hence must either be marginalised or annihilated (the greatest irony of all). As Vamana is buried, the city space quickly resumes its ordinariness (orderliness, normalcy), indifferent to the death of a threatening monster. Perhaps, as Richard Sennett argues concerning bodies in pain in the city, the "suffering body [displays] itself in empty space, a space of abstract freedom but no enduring human connection."[17] I find Sennett's conclusion to be both tragic and true, and Khan's novel certainly exemplifies this tragedy of contemporary urban experience. The body in pain is a body in "abstract freedom" because it defies any form of conventional coding of the body. The body in pain, as Elaine Scarry so brilliantly shows, is:

> brought forward in its most extreme form only on behalf of a cultural artifact or symbolic fragment or made thing (a sentence) that is without any other basis in material reality: that is, it is only brought forward when there is a crisis of substantiation. As a result of this unanchored quality, the disembodied cultural fragment has a fluidity not shared by its physical counterpart – in war the damage inflicted on bodies is unalterable, whereas the symbolic claims or issues change with great ease.[18]

For Scarry, the suffering body enacts a certain politics of its own in that it tears itself away from the coding of culture – one formed by signs and images of normalcy – and, in its inalterability, shows up culture in all its fragility, constructed-ness and fantasy. The body in pain is vitally material whereas the coded body of "normal" culture is fantastical, artificial and largely symbolic. But as Sennett goes on to show, this body will, in the end, remain outside community and communion. Its base materiality exposes the depthlessness of the "normal" body too much to be allowed inclusion in that ideology. It may find a sort of communion with other like and deformed bodies, but in the end, it must be either marginalised (with these other like bodies) or be destroyed. Yet, all is not in vain. Vamana, the deformed dwarf, and his re-imagined stories have made a temporary but necessary mark in the ordinariness of Delhi, and in this sense, have seeped into and become one with the unconscious life of the city:

> *Words once spoken are never lost.* His eyelids collapse. *I am blessed with immortality.* A faint glow of accomplishment spreads across his face.
>
> (355, author's emphasis)

Who knows? Perhaps one day, someone in Chandni Chawk will remember Vamana and his tales, and resurrect them again to destabilise once more the ideology of the normal and the ruthless.

Notes

[1] Adib Khan, *The Storyteller* (Sydney: Flamingo, 2000). All references are to this edition.

[2] Steve Pile, *The Body in the City: Psychoanalysis, Space & Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 227.

[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1996), 9 (author's emphasis).

[4] Pile, 227.

[5] Butler, 8.

[6] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 6.

[7] In saying this, I am not arguing that space has no reality whatsoever and that it is always purely a construction. Space has indeed its physical reality, but what happens is that space is always also "commodified" and made to "signify meaningfully" through social and cultural codification. In other words, space is always a physical reality *and* a production. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson – Smith (Oxford : Blackwell, 1991).

[8] See Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*.Trans. by C. Porter with C. Burke. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1985), esp. pp. 76 and 77 for her view on "elsewhere." See also Mark Wigley's essay "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality and Space*. Ed. Beatrice Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992) 327 – 389 for a persuasive and interesting reading of the Irigarian elsewhere.

[9] Patricia Duncker, "Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*," in *Literature and History* 10.1 (1984): 6.

[10] I will use the pronoun "he" for the *hijra* purely for the purpose of simplification.

[11] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 157.

[12] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 186. The view of the lost other as maternal is from Julia Kristeva. For a fuller discussion, see, for example, her essay "Stabat Mater" in *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 160 – 186.

[13] Žižek, 157 (author's emphasis).

[14] Jonathan Dollimore, "Desire & Difference: Homosexuality, Race, Masculinity" in *Race & Subject of Masculinity*. Eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 24.

[15] One such example occurs on pp. 120 – 23 when the *hijras* were denied a place at the table at a wedding after performing their song and dance because their presence "wouldn't be...well...right" (122). Farida Baji and her entourage respond with a "singing soared to a high pitch. The tempo of the movements increased. And then...and then... Oh, it was so wonderfully wicked! The *hijras* turned their backs on the newly arrived guests and flashed themselves. What a brilliant display of colour! Bunched-up saris held firmly in both hands, they swayed sideways. Backward and forward thrusts. Faster ... faster. Then they turned their bottom towards us" (123). Yet even here, the fact of the *hijra*'s missing phallus is not clearly spelled out, persisting on the gender liminality of this people.

[16] Vamana however, refuses to leave prison because by this time, his closest friends were either dead or lost through betrayal. Nevertheless, Vamana is made to leave anyhow.

[17] Richard Sennett, *Flesh & Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilisation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 375.

[18] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 127.

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Re-Seeding "Englishness": Agonism in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce

Writers such as Timothy Mo and Hanif Kureishi, whose "cultural identity" is marked by miscegenation, question reactionary discourses of cultural authenticity and nationalism. They rewrite English identity — and, by extension, any national identity — in their own terms, rejecting ideas of cultural purity and focusing instead on processes of adaptation and negotiation. Mo's portrait of England centres on a psychologically ghettoised Chinese community in London which seems to ignore the colonisers' gaze instead of returning it. Non-Chinese characters rarely appear in *Sour Sweet*, and do so only in the background. The only non-Chinese character who is given a certain prominence in the novel is Mr. Constantinides, whose name indicates that he is probably of Greek origin. But it is possible to see Mo's description of cultural negotiation within the microcosm of Chinese migrants as a comment on English society as a whole. Hanif Kureishi also manages to upset settled notions of Englishness "at home" by offering a representation of England as inherently impure culturally. He is not only returning the colonisers' gaze but also reshaping it.

In the 1960s, a relatively new racial discourse replaced race with nationality and cultural unity. On the 16th of November 1968, Enoch Powell stated that "the West Indian or Indian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still" (quoted by Layton-Henry, 76). Powell distinguishes between state and nation, asks for repatriation of the non-white immigrants, and denies English nationality to their children, who are perceived as citizens of the United Kingdom "in law", but as alien to English culture in practice. His words modify the concept of nationality, dressing it in mythical, symbolic garments. Powell refuses to acknowledge change in his community, whose member composition

has diverged greatly from its mythic image. His attitude arises from fear that an imaginary English character could be diluted by massive immigration. Ten years after Powell's speech, Margaret Thatcher's approach is more indirect, but she shares his views on cultural exclusion:

> I think [the present rate of immigration] means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people of a different culture. The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, then people are going to be rather hostile to those coming in.
>
> (*The Guardian*, 31 January 1978)

Thatcher would like to see the flood of immigration stopped from "swamping" the metaphorical fields of English culture. Powell goes further to suggest that the already "swamped" fields be drained by repatriation. Both still believe involution – a going back to an imaginary "former national identity"— is possible. However, as Steven Connor points out in *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*:

> Many of the most striking and significant explorations of national identity in the postwar British novel have been the product not of inside-out excursion but of an outside-in recursion, as outsiders who where previously held spatially and culturally at a distance have returned or have doubled back to the distant imperial centres to which they had previously been connected.
>
> (85)

I would go further to suggest that the categories "outside-in" and "inside-out" should be taken as axes between which writers like Mo and Kureishi move in a translation process similar to Wolfgang Iser's "recursive looping" (Iser, 33). This almost imperceptible sense of constant re-adjustment is what permeates both *Sour Sweet* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

The psychological processes of change within migrants and their British descendants in England impacted little on general perceptions of nationality and cultural identity. Shifts in group and individual identities are still represented through polarised, immutable imagery-discourse which interprets race in terms of cultural authenticity and nationality. Homi Bhabha's theoretical statements in *The Location of Culture* throw light on this problem. Bhabha distinguishes between the concept of ontological "truth" and the articulation of the "true", which is described as an act of

agonism (22). Agonism, from the Greek compound *a-gōnos*, meaning "without forming an angle", does not stand for the opposite of antagonism, since it does not imply agreement, harmony or amity. Instead, agonism represents the double action of differing, that is to say, being dissimilar in quality, nature, or degree; and deferring, postponing, respecting. The ambivalence of "agonism" enables political attitudes to be constituted as different, whilst still containing traces of previous and future positions.

Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* illustrates how agonism determines change within the Chinese community in England. Chinatown is presented as a self-sufficient, autonomous ghetto within London. But, despite the apparent strength of the migrant Chinese community's traditions, cultural conflict takes its toll on their seemingly unalterable identities. The novel depicts two parallel stories, the conflict between two Triad organisations — the Hung family and 14-K — and the struggle of Chen's family to come to terms with their new life in England. Connor defines the title of the novel as "a characterisation of the swinging back and forth of the narrative between the small-scale domestic concerns of Lily and her family and the complex ceremonial and violent activities of the triad" and goes on to say that *Sour Sweet* also establishes "continuities between the two levels of life" (98). Although it is true that the narrative alternates both stories whilst at the same time drawing parallels between them, it is not clear which is the sweet and which the sour story, since it seems to me that both represent a mixture of the advantages and inconveniences of belonging to a close-knit group. The Chens and the triad are both "families"[1] that help their members whilst holding them to more or less strict rules. Looked at from this perspective, *Sour Sweet* could be compared to texts such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. The most obvious difference is that whereas cultural displacement reinforces the ties within the Mafia in Coppola's film, in *Sour Sweet* it triggers and accelerates internecine and generational conflicts within the Hung family and the Chens. These conflicts, which are shaped by agonism, are instances of hybridisation and revision of cultural identity.

The two families' internal relationships and their interaction with the immediate communities around them — the English community and the community of Chinese migrants respectively — can be seen as microcosmic versions of the discourse of nationalism. Benedict Anderson refers to the paradoxical nature of nationalism as "the objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists" (14). The desire to see national identity as stable through

time and space stems from the need to define the community by opposition to what "it is not". Reluctance to accept cultural (and racial) hybridity and attachment to mythified conceptions of cultural identity, exemplified at their most extreme in the novel by Red Cudgel and Lily, denote insecurity about political strength.

The story of domestic struggle between Lily and her sister Mui runs wittily parallel to, and intersects with, the criminal story of the take-over in the Hung family. Lily's angry outburst after Man Kee declares he wants to be a gardener separates her from the rest of the family:

> She put her hands round Man Kee's mango plant and tugged at it. It would not come up. She bent her knees and pulled with her back as well as her arms. There was a subterranean tearing, the sound of small roots, tendrils, and delicate fibres shearing and snapping. Still it wouldn't come. Lily took a deep breath. She wiped cold sweat from her forehead. She strained, fighting the plant with her whole body. With louder vegetable groanings it began to come out of the earth. Another long pull and then the plant was uprooted with a single loud snap that seemed to come out of her own body, so that for a moment Lily wondered if she had cracked her own vertebrae...Her blood pounded in her ears; she was panting; there was a sharp, almondy smell high in her nostrils. Yes, it was the plant; she sniffed the roots and the earth. Juice, sap must be running out from its ruptured veins.
>
> (*SS*, 263-264)

The plant takes on human features, including "tendrils" and "fibres" which shear and snap like human bones and flesh, "veins" though which sap runs like blood, and a whole range of resisting "vegetable groaning". Lily manages to uproot the plant, which is a symbol of Man Kee's "assimilation to British life" (Connor, 101). By tearing it, she tries to prevent her son from rooting into the "wrong" land and the "wrong" traditions. Instead, she severs the link created between her son and herself when she gave him the mango seed.

Elaine Ho reads this passage as "an act of destruction which is symbolic of her – matriarchal — up-rooting of the organic bond between father and son" which is ultimately damaging for Lily since her identity is the product of patriarchy (58).[1] I agree that this is what Lily could have unconsciously meant in uprooting the plant, but Ho does not make clear why it is the father-son relationship that is destroyed, rather than that of mother-son. It is true that Man Kee and Chen share an interest in gardening, but the mango plant has grown out of Lily's present to Man

Kee. With it's potential to bear fruit, it is also a symbol of motherhood and reproduction. Connor hints at this interpretation when he perceptively equates the episode to "a kind of birth" (101). Ho seems to forget the fact that Lily's outburst unites Man Kee, Chen and Mui in a protective circle and leaves her out of it. Neither the description nor the result of Lily's actions appear to correspond to a conscious attack on the "organic bond between father and son". Lily's violent actions — however well meant — rebound on her, increasing her isolation within the family. Her stubborn determination to keep her family's roots "Chinese" contrasts with Mui's assimilation and later naturalisation, Man Kee's relatively easy rooting into the receiving culture, and Chen's rejection of China but uneasy accommodation to living in England: "Chen felt at home and not at home. He had been more comfortable rootless" (*SS*, 141).

If we want to read the passage as Lily's reaction against patriarchal authority, we must go even further back to her own upbringing. Ho inspiringly analyses the performativity of culture and the effect that different training has on Lily's and Mui's personalities:

> Mo shows, through Lily, and her sister Mui, what it can mean for an individual and specifically, a woman, to be subjected to the irresistible patriarchal moulding of an orthodox Chinese family. The sister's identities are stamped by their father, and it is this determinism which makes *Sour Sweet* a much bleaker novel than *The Monkey King*.
>
> (53)

The importance of Lily's training by her father in place of the son he never had is referred to throughout the novel and accounts for the symbolic distabilisation of Lily's masculine and feminine principles. Apparently, she is a victim of her father's emphasis on masculinity during her formative years. The alternation of traditionally masculine activities with feminine role models parallel her obsessive refusal to have sweet food after salty food, which she believes would upset the balance between the masculine and feminine principles. This turns her into the perfect example for the novel's sweetness and sourness. Lily is a cultural hybrid, just like the mango plant and Man Kee, but regarding gender roles.

As Judith Butler suggests, gender is performative (2) but Lily has been given contradictory messages regarding her gender identity. This is why she is so keen to keep her and her family's ethnic roots, because her own identity has been destabilised by conflicting messages about her femininity. So uprooting the plant is both turning against the father's law, both by

going against Chen's wishes and by trying to suppress the memory of her father's training and the ambivalence within her. This could be interpreted as an act of resistance. But it can similarly be seen as reactionary, since it tries to reinforce traditional patriarchal values and ideals of femininity and Chineseness, even if neither she or her family can fit them. Ho recognises as much when she states that:

> Through Lily, cultural identity is posited as the completed process of early life in the family; once formed, this identity is manifested through life, and the narrative shows the unfolding, rather than the transformation or complication, of Lily as a "Chinese" subject. Migration only serves to intensify this given identity, to reduce it, in Lily's consciousness, to its formative elements which then mass and coagulate and become a bulkwark against change.
>
> (54)

The key phrase in this passage is "in Lily's consciousness". For Lily consciously rejects anything she considers "un-Chinese" and follows the traditional role of wife, daughter-in-law and mother by the book. However, as several of her actions and final thoughts about Chen's absence demonstrate, she is merely acting out those parts as she believes should be played:

> How light-hearted she could feel! Surely Husband hadn't weighed on her like that? He was such a quiet, self-efacing man. But it was as if a stone had been taken off her and she had sprung to what her height should have been. She thought she had found a balance of things for the first time, yin cancelling yang, discovered it not by going to the centre at once — which was a prude's way and untypical of her — but by veering to the extremes and then finding the still point of equillibrium.
>
> (*SS*, 286)

Chen's absence and the removal of her father-in-law are the last bastions of the power structures that keep Lily's consciousness tied to traditional gender and ethnic roles which prevent her from accepting or even considering change. She deludes herself by going back to a mythified childhood and a fixed cultural stance. Her puzzled realisation of her happiness as a virtual single mother is the only sign Mo gives of Lily's underlying unhappiness in the role she inhabits. Lily's identity is not a peaceful middle ground in between polarised positions. Like the writers who continually move between traditions, she must always travel back and forth between 'the extremes' to construct her self.

The Hung family also boasts of its origins: "We represent the old and true way, a way which has all but vanished" (*SS*, 76). It uses a simple, even crude, discourse of "authenticity" in order to assert its authority over the exploited migrant community. Yet Mo satirises its claims as an ideological construction, which is increasingly revealed as a political façade. White Paper Fan, who in public claims moral superiority for the Hung family on historical grounds, advocates adaptation to new situations in private as part of his plan to displace its leader, Red Cudgel:

> [A] set of circumstances becomes inappropriate under another. For a time in Hong Kong crude street fighting ability became the qualification for high rank and the main criterion for usefulness. That was right for the time and place. Those qualities were most correct for the society then. In another place and another time one would perhaps be justified in looking for other qualities in a leader.
>
> (*SS*, 188)

White Paper Fan's call for agonic change within the context of the criminal organisation contrasts with his former defence of the Hung family as an "authentic" secret society with a long past and a "true" way of doing things. The analysis of White Paper Fan's position throws light on Mui's role within Chen's family. His shifting perspective recalls Mui's experience of cultural shock at her arrival in England and her progressive adaptation to a new environment. Mui and White Paper Fan emerge as transitional figures, modifying their behaviour whilst still keeping some of their old beliefs. Their agonic stances display an ambivalent discourse containing traces of the past and seeds for the future. Their flexibility challenges the idea of the "essential" nature of nationalities in both migrant and receiving communities.

Though Mui is often seen as yielding to her sister's wishes, she adapts to the new situation which migration to England has created. Her ability to speak English and recognise "occidental faces" is better than Lily's. She also introduces the profitable sale of "English" and hybrid food such as Horlicks, ice-cream and chips with sweet and sour sauce. Mui's apparent passivity hides an ambivalent, agonic approach which contrasts with Lily's strong will. She tries not to hurt her sister's feelings, but ends up taking the leadership of the family, including Lily's father-in-law, to her new home, winning Man Kee's love, and setting up a fish and chip restaurant in a better place than Lily's Chinese takeaway. Her moves are similar to those of White Paper Fan, who admits that they "would have seceded [from Red Cudgel's organisation] in any case" (*SS*, 270).

Mui's assimilation to England draws her closer to Man Kee than Lily. Her position in between mother and son is again parodied in the criminal sphere by White Paper Fan, who is in between Red Cudgel and the younger generation of criminals. Chen's death is the turning point, precipitating both Red Cudgel's and Lily's fall from power. For Red Cudgel, his death is an unforgivable mistake. For Lily, her husband's disappearance means a status diminished to that of an abandoned wife and a single mother. Mui asks her to live with her, but Lily finds it difficult to accept the reversal of roles: "what was she [Mui] talking about? She was in Lily's family, not the other way around" (*SS*, 284). Division, however, is not presented as antagonistic, but in the shape of coexistence and negotiation:

> And this was the end of the old life, the life of the loving, closely knit family Mui and Lily knew they had been. Mui might be living only ten minutes' walk away (fifteen in slippers, three in an expertly driven van); Man Kee might make frequent visits to his fond aunt, often go there straight from school, even sleep the night there... But distance, physical distance anyway, had nothing to do with the change in the amorphous but tough-skinned organism their family had been. There had been parturition, the single cell had contracted, swelled, and through the wall had escaped matter from its very nucleus. Now there were two cells, sharing the same territory, happily co-existing but quite autonomous.
>
> (*SS*, 285)

Mo's describes the two sisters' final situation, their division and co-existence in private and business alike, in terms that evoke natural organisms and relate the family again to the mango plant. These comments could also allude to the final agreement between Hung family and 14-K. Mo's portrait of the Chinese community in London emphasises its co-existence with the rest of the English society, but also its autonomy and resilience. They live uprooted from their source community and isolated too from the receiving culture. However, the seed for future movements within each cell has been planted. Mui's and White Paper Fan's assimilation foregrounds Man Kee's rooting in a different soil. However difficult it may be, the mango plant will manage to grow in a hostile environment.

Just as Powell believes he is safe in an "imaginary England", Lily is sure that Man Kee's life will be shaped by his Chinese roots. Mui's influence and his English schooling she sees as "just a gloss on the real definition of his life" (*SS*, 285). We do not hear Man Kee's thoughts on the subject, but his actions point in the opposite direction. He speaks in English

before he says a word in Cantonese, prefers school food to his mother's, is fonder of Mui than of Lily, refuses his mother's lifts to school out of embarrassment, and climbs to the upper deck of buses as soon as Lily cannot see him. Lily's final thought ends the novel on a disturbing note: "She might have lost Husband for a while but she still had Son. Who could take him away from her?" (*SS*, 287). Lily is blind to the changes within her family and its relations to their new environment. Man Kee has not yet stood up against Lily, but his life seems bound to be rooted in ambivalence and hybridity.

Cultural re-adjustment is conveyed by Mo's metaphorical use of food, which starts with the novel's suggestive title. *Sour Sweet* is a curious inversion of the sauce popular with the takeaway costumes. The reversal of the terms in the title parallels the changes "Chinese" food undergoes to be served to non-Chinese people. The food the Chens serve has been "researched", "invented", and is "stereotyped" (*SS*, 111). Lily's "concoctions" become odd blends of Chinese and English ingredients, which she nevertheless administers to poor Chen:

> Lily concocted slimy herbal draughts for Chen...The formulas were improvised. Her father had given her the recipes. The trouble was the ingredients were not available in the UK...In a great improvising tradition, worthy of the host country, Lily stuck to the originals where she could and where this was not possible she included something she considered similar (i.e.[sic.] carrot for rhinoceros horn).
>
> (*SS*,12)

Chinese immigrants must adjust to living in a different country. Lily's problems with ingredients and Chen's "researched" menu are an amusing example of the way other cultures invade national London's high streets, redefining both. Despite the attachment of the adjective "Chinese" to migrants, they have been as reinvented, stereotyped and concocted as "Chinese" food has, both for others and for themselves. The mango plant managed to grow when Lily thought it would be impossible. It seems that Powell's repatriation is not a simple weeding of his back garden. Mo's seemingly closed "Chinese" community consists of people who have been transplanted, naturalised, and have become as much a part of the "national character" as the "national character" has become part of them.

Hanif Kureishi's approach contrasts with Timothy Mo's, who is also a product of miscegenation but only deals with this issue indirectly. Whilst Mo writes *within* the ghetto, Kureishi writes *against* any kind of ghetto, whether Indian or English. The neatness of racial divisions we encounter

in *Sour Sweet* explodes in *The Buddha of Suburbia* into myriad instances of "race relations". Notions of nationality and authenticity are related to assimilation and miscegenation in postcolonial England. Karim is "considered a funny kind of Englishman" (*BS*, 3), as the novel itself might be considered a funny kind of English literature. The adjective "funny", meaning humorous, peculiar, but also suspect or dubious, seems to condense the different layers of Kureishi's narrative.

Kureishi, himself a hybrid, explores the ways migrants and natives build their identities in an endless process of agonism, which frequently presents itself as apparent antagonism. He refers to the role played by education in the transmission of the colonial discourse, generating ambivalence towards the colonised and offering a partial view of British "civilisation". This is not dealt with by Mo, perhaps because of the different, more difficult relationship that Britain maintained with China. The Chinese consider themselves as belonging to an ancient empire never conquered, nor colonised. Mo's characters arrive in England without even a working knowledge of English. Mui had been in contact with an Englishman for whom she worked, but does not seem to have absorbed a great deal from the experience. Her attitude when first confronted with Mr. Constantinides reveals her inexperience:

> She [Mui] tittered. This was out of the nervousness, embarrassment, and excitement of seeing a flesh and blood Englishman, as opposed to a flickering one-dimensional image on the screen, in her house for the first time. You couldn't very well get a more flesh and blood specimen, redder and hairier, than the present example of an Englishman.
>
> (*SS*, 109)

Mui does not seem to have ever seen "a flesh and blood Englishman". She compares Mr. Constantinides to an image "on the [television] screen". Curiously, Mo does not mention her former, "English" employer here, maybe implying that being abroad erases "Englishness" as much as it alters "Chineseness". Mui's expectations are depicted as arising purely from the programmes shown in England. Therefore, although they stem from representations, they do not seem as biased as those of Haroon, the alleged "Buddha of Suburbia" in Hanif Kureishi's eponymous novel:

> [Haroon] was amazed and heartened by the sight of the British in England...He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen. He'd never seen an Englishman stuffing bread into his mouth with his fingers, an no one had told him

> that the English didn't wash regularly because the water was so cold -if they had water at all. And when he [Haroon] tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman.
>
> (*BS*, 24-25)

Class divisions in the metropolis had been left out of the school curriculum in the colonies. Haroon belongs to the Indian upper-class, who were encouraged to imitate the British rulers without forgetting that they are "*almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 86). This policy responds to T.B. Macaulay's famous "Minute on education" (1835), which promoted the creation of "a class of interpreters between us [the colonial power] and the millions whom we govern — a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, cited by Bhabha, 87). To the readers' amusement, the English middle class stereotyping of Indian migrants runs along the same lines as Haroon's portrait of the English lower classes: "Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and of whom it was said they were not familiar with cutlery and certainly not with toilets, since they squatted on the seats and shat from on high" (*BS*, 24). What Haroon thought was only restricted to the Indian lower class can also be found in England, however much the English middle and upper classes try to hide it.

However, Macaulay obviously did not expect that the "educated" Indians would one day threaten the discourse of Englishness by travelling to the metropolis and demanding their rights as Commonwealth citizens, even less the possibility that Indian "blood and colour" could be representative of Englishness at all. Migrants in *Sour Sweet* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* are seen as potential agents of change in England. Their agonism represents a threat to the imagined notion of "English" nationality, which is accentuated by the ambiguous situation of their children in relation to both source and host cultures. The "nationalness" of the National Front and the remarks on the "funny" status of Karim's "Englishness" stem from fear of change. Changez, whose name is interestingly close to "change", or even its plural "changes", is attacked by supporters of the National Front, who disguise their racism as patriotism. "Englishness" is just a "front", a disguise of racist attitudes and fear of change. Intriguingly, the National Front's claims of superiority on the grounds of "authenticity" parallel those of the Triad organisations in *Sour Sweet*.

Shadwell echoes Macaulay's ideology from a politically correct, postmodern present. Despite his humorous remarks and apparent concern for Karim, he still sees him as a "half-caste in England...belonging to nowhere, wanted nowhere" (*BS*, 141):

> 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!' he [Shadwell] went. He said, 'What breed of people two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you [Karim]. What puzzlement there'd be. Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear from him. And you're from Orpington.'
>
> (*BS*, 141)

Shadwell's position is an instance of latent Orientalism, which Said sees as "mainly unconscious" and difficult to modify (206). He accepts the influence imperialism has had on the metropolis, but only to the extent of creating a "new breed of people", never to the revision of his own idea of Englishness. An older Karim uses that same expression at the beginning of the novel to report what people think about him. He refers to his hybrid state as emerging from "two old stories", an "odd mixture of continents and blood" and a feeling of "belonging and not", rather than to race mixing. Karim stresses the textuality of "nationality" by treating cultures as "stories", thus linking them to narration and fiction. Shadwell stresses the new breed's extraordinary situation in being artificially produced by "two hundred years of imperialism" out of seemingly "natural" breeds. Karim, on the other hand, subverts his language, making all national discourses subjects of and subjected to human intervention and invention.

Karim's and Shadwell's different approaches to the discourses of nationality are best seen through their attitudes to staging Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Shadwell's "authentic Mowgli" must wear a loin-cloth and brown make-up, and speak with an Indian accent (whatever that means, taking into account the linguistic diversity of the sub-continent). The fact that Karim has been born and brought up in England does not prevent Shadwell from seeing him still as Mowgli and, what is more, an "authentic" Mowgli. Comically, however, Karim is not black enough for him, and lacks the appropriate accent:

> Shadwell took me aside and said, 'A word about the accent, Karim. I think it should be an authentic accent.'
>
> 'What d'you mean authentic?'
>
> 'Where was our Mowgli born?'

'India.'
'Yes. Not Orpington. What accent do they have in India?'
'Indian accents.'
'Ten out of ten.'
'No, Jeremy. Please, no.'
'Karim, you have been cast for authenticity and not for experience.'
(*BS*, 146-147)

Shadwell's "authentic" Mowgli must not have an Orpington accent because, like Powell, Shadwell extends Mowgliness to all the Indian community in England and their English born children. To be Indian for him one must belong, even if it is only partially, to a specific "breed" of people. Therefore, Karim *must* play Mowgli. Shadwell's insistence that Karim "[has] been cast for authenticity" is ridiculous since neither Karim or Mowgli seem to fit into what he wants "authentic" Indianness to be. If we follow the internal logic of *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli should be emitting wolf cries during most of the play, and then shift into English. He would not have an "Indian accent" since Kipling's book was written in English. It could be argued that Mowgli learns one of the Indian languages during his stay in the village, but Kipling's fictional authenticity allows the reader to take as "Indian" the English text. Therefore, Mowgli's language should be English devoid of any "Indian accent" like Karim's, in fact.

In purely literary terms, Karim's perception of Mowgli is more "authentic" than Shadwell's. Karim becomes Mowgli in his imagination for a brief time long before we know about the play: "I [Karim] watched Jamila, and pressed my nose to the glass and made a range of jungle noises. I was Mowgli threatening Shere Khan. But she didn't hear me" (*BS*, 51). Ironically, by identifying with Mowgli, Karim is actually transcending his 'Indianness'. Kipling's Mowgli is of course not "Indian", he belongs to the jungle, to the world of children's games and stories. Karim is not conscious yet of the implications of Kipling's *The Jungle Book* for the colonial imagination. He reacts like any other child brought up in England. He will grow to perceive racialist attitudes and, like Kureishi, will react with the only thing left by the "liberal" society he lives in, black humour.

The representation of "national" identity is closely related to language in general, and to accents in particular. Haroon has been trying to suppress or disguise his Indian accent and learn Latinate and Greek compound terms to "impress an Englishman" (*BS*, 28). Kureishi may be exaggerating -or even joking- when he has the character learn words like "analeptic, frutescent, polycephalous and oegulous"(*BS*, 28). These words are not

only unlikely to figure in Haroon's "tiny blue dictionary...the size of a matchbox" (*BS*, 28), but they are also likely to alienate most English speakers. The impulse to outdo the "English" at what they consider to be their distinctive national feature, the English language, is a way of trying to fit into the community.

Haroon's reaction to Karim's performance, "an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!" (*BS*, 157), seems at first sight reasonable but is ironic if we think about his own performance as a Buddhist. Having sought assimilation through dress code and accent, Haroon works on inverting the process, in order to establish a factitious, exotic "authenticity". Karim was pressured into performing on stage, whereas his father performs willingly and, what is more, even assumes the character he creates:

> I [Karim] put my ear against the white paintwork of the door. Yes, God [Karim's father] was talking to himself, but not intimately. He was speaking slowly, in a voice deeper than usual, as if he were addressing a crowd. He was *hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent*. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads. Why? [my emphasis].
>
> (*BS*, 21)

Haroon is introduced in the process of reversing his colonial mimicry and assimilation. This exaggerated accent is as contrived as his English accent and is reinforced by his taking up of Buddhism. It is significant that Karim hears his father's transformative efforts "through the white paintwork of the door". Haroon has not yet mastered his new character, which is still hidden behind his "white" mask. He is the reverse of a "Black and White Minstrel". A product of colonial mimicry and agonic assimilation, Haroon is Kureishi's parody of an "Englishman", the Mowgli who does not feel comfortable anywhere.

In the eyes of the likes of Eva, the "Chinese" spiritual practices of Buddhism are smoothly related to Haroon's "Indianness". Their responses vary from amusement mixed with racialist language, as in Shadwell's case, to utter reverence and belief. These two opposed views are the development of a duplicity concerning the Orient highlighted by Edward Said. The cultural construct of "the Orient" is split into the glorious past and the corrupt present. Thus mystic practices and old traditions are seen as pure, spiritual and "authentic", whereas present-day "Orientals" are considered to be a degeneration from their past civilisation. This is

probably why everybody seems to accept him as a spiritual guide without questioning his suitability. Karim, on the other hand, is quite sceptical about "a renegade Muslim *masquerading* as a Buddhist [my emphasis]" (*BS*, 16) and keeps an amused distance between himself and his father, whilst still appreciating his godlike ability to transform himself. Haroon's metamorphosis is embedded in the world of acting and appearances. He is propelled into a stage where his audience are able to suspend the vision of the Indian migrant and plunge into the Oriental stage, which Said relates to the idea of representation:

> The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.
>
> (Said, 63)

The Oriental stage is as closed, familiar, and dependent on Europe as it can be in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The performances take place at the very core of the community, in the private houses of the lower-middle class. The audience listens to Haroon as a way of displacing their anxieties and in pursuit of the exotic. Some of them have even been to India, but seem to have brought back with them only the fetishes that represent that country in Western eyes:

> God [Haroon] told me [Karim] that the house was owned by Carl and Marianne, friends of Eva, who'd been recently trekking in India. This was immediately obvious from the sandalwood Buddhas, brass ashtrays and stripped plaster elephants which decorated every available space. And by the fact that Carl and Marianne stood barefoot at the door as we entered, the palms of their hands together in prayer and their heads bowed as if they were temple servants and not partners in the local TV rental firm of Rumbold & Toedrip.
>
> (*BS*, 30)

At first sight it may seem that objects from India ought to be more "authentic" than televisions, which are emblems of postmodern society and its artificiality. But by using them as decoration, they transform them into fetishes, just as Haroon turns himself into "a magician, a wonder-maker". Both objects and spiritual guide create an illusion of "the Orient" for the English suburban audience to believe in as real and "authentic".

Haroon is the embodiment of his audience's desire to go beyond their

familiar world without leaving their living-rooms, to grasp the unknown "Orient". The Orient they find, though, is incorporated into their world. It is their own "drama", the one they direct even if Haroon performs it. Via migration and assimilation, the Buddha of Suburbia has become not only the informant, but also the interpreter of "Oriental spirituality" in the suburbs. He is not in charge of constructing the meaning, his audience is.

But the stage is not reduced to migrants and their children. All the characters in the novel put on a show of themselves. Eva Kay directs Haroon's staging. She is possessive of Haroon and organises his public appearances, using him as a spring-board into London society and the "wonder-making" world of the theatre and interior design:

> I [Karim] noticed that at these "do's", as I still called them, to rile her, Eva was constructing an artistic persona for herself. People like her loved artists and anything "artistic" the word itself was a philtre; a whiff of the sublime accompanied its mentions; it was an entrance to the uncontrolled and inspired. Her kind would do anything to append the heavenly word "artist" to themselves. (They had to do it themselves –no one else would.) I heard Eva say once, 'I'm an artist, a designer, my team and I do houses.'
> (*BS*, 150)

Eva sells Haroon's exoticism in the same way that Charlie sells Englishness and punk style to the States later in the novel; the only difference being that Haroon has internalised his role as spiritual leader, whilst Charlie is more cynical about his own performance:

> I [Karim] walked down the street, laughing, amused that here in America Charlie had acquired this cockney accent when my first memory of him at school was that he'd cried after being mocked by the stinking gypsy kids for talking so posh...Now he was going for cockney rhyming slang, too...He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it.
> (*BS*, 247)

Charlie's newly acquired cockney accent is also a sign of the role he is playing. He is selling "Englishness" as much as Haroon sells "Orientalism", the Chens sell "Chinese food" and Shadwell tries to prey on Karim's supposed "Indianness". All the characters in Kureishi's novel are caught on the hop, in between what they think they are and what they would like to become. England is the stage for their whims which are shaped, amongst other things, by migration and agonic change. Kureishi's

England is no longer the alienating world migrants encountered, but a Lilliputian parody of an Imperial power whose seemingly small members have taken over.

Despite differences in approach, both Mo and Kureishi undermine the idea that national identity is based on cultural "authenticity". Whereas Mo questions "Englishness" by ignoring the gaze of the champions of cultural exclusion, Kureishi stages it as a collective, neurotic delusion. Mo keeps his criticism *within* the Chinese ghetto. Kureishi, on the other hand, rejects the possibility of any ghetto. But both reveal the on-going process of agonism which changes immigrants and receiving community together. Mo sends a message as clear as Kureishi's: the English fields *have* been "swamped" and neither immigrants nor reactionary purists can reverse the multiple, agonic processes that this has triggered. "Englishness" may still be perceived as immutable, but immigrants and their children have planted a seed which will not only adapt to the "English" countryside, but also change it.

Notes

[1] For an insightful discussion of the triad as a family in *Sour Sweet*, see Elaine Ho's *Timothy Mo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000: 64 – 66).

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The Durian Season

Mulaika Hijjas

We never bought durians from the stalls: first of all because we were certain we would have been cheated. Even if the man guaranteed his durian we knew that it wouldn't turn out to be worth the ten or even twenty ringgit a kilo he charged and that when we came back, brandishing the offending fruit, he'd have long ago loaded up his lorry and gone. And also because we had, behind our house, the best durian trees in the state. These trees happened to belong to the state, which was an even better reason for appropriating the fruit. After all, as my father said, it was only fair that government servants got some compensation for their miserable salaries. So, at night, in the durian season, he and I would creep around in the undergrowth, scanning the ground with our feeble torches, the kind that come free when you buy a pack of batteries. I was afraid of snakes, and would train the torch-light and my eyes to the ground directly around me, searching it intently before I ventured to take another step, flinching at the shadow cast by a fallen branch as my torch passed over it. I had a horror of brushing my toes, naked in my plastic slippers, against dry, moving scales. My father, wearing rubber boots, tramped happily through the leaf debris and patches of undergrowth, and always got to the durian first, resting in the slight indentation its impact had made in the soil. Lying in bed at night in the durian season I used to hear the fruit crashing through the leaves, and the thud as it hit the ground. Before the appearance of the bad hats, I would merely roll over and wrap myself more tightly in my blanket, smiling at the possibility of durian for breakfast. After the bad hats, I had to stumble out of bed and rap on the door of my parents' room, to wake my father so that the two of us could go out and search through the undergrowth for the fallen fruit.

I was not afraid of being hit by a falling durian; my father had procured two old motorcycle crash helmets which we wore on these occasions. The

bad hats had not been so well prepared: one night in the durian season we had been awakened by agitated voices and a sudden pounding on our door. Switching o the veranda light and peering cautiously through the curtains we were just in time to see a young man, gripping the railing in one hand and a durian in the other, fold up like a concertina and topple to the floor, his eyes rolling up into his skull. When the police came they took the man to the hospital and confiscated the durian. My father got a copy of the police report some weeks later: "Suspect and several other bad hats engaged in staking out durian trees in Lot 245 of Selangor Forest Research Institute. Suspect struck by falling object, believed to be durian of medium size. Suspect's companions brought him to nearby house and then fled. Suspect currently in stable condition. Durian has been remanded into police custody." Not having much faith in the ability of the police to detain or deter the thieves, my father henceforth made it his business to be first to the fallen durian.

The durian trees made a sort of buffer between our house and the jungle. It was not a real jungle: it had all been logged a few decades before and was now a sort of laboratory for the dispirited forestry schemes worked out by my father and his colleagues. How to grow instant forests, how to re-seed logged ones, how to grow cash crops in secondary jungle. All sorts of ideas that bred papers and symposia but were never implemented. As a result, the jungle contained some surprises. One could follow the path, stepping over the leeches waving upright in the mud waiting for a passing feed, and break suddenly into a unlit patch where there was a research station with saplings planted in neat rows, or concentric circles, or whatever had been the rage in forestry ten years before. Once I found a place where someone had experimented with vanilla orchids, and then forgotten about them. The orchids had run wild, clinging to every crevice on the trees. The air was heavy with a musky smell that made my head ache. Then also, there were the rope bridges which hung suspended from the trees up in the canopy. Sometimes it would be noisy with children on school excursions, leaning on the ropes and making the bridges swing, shrieking at their own audacity. Mostly, though, no-one came, and I would spend the afternoon lying on the wooden walkway of the bridge, my cheek resting on the slats that creaked as the trees creaked when the wind moved them, looking down at the forest floor a hundred feet beneath. The breeze turned up the pewter-coloured undersides of the leaves, and a hawk rode the updrafts in the hot sky above. I used to wonder what it would be like if I rolled over, let

go of the railings, and plummeted downwards.

Our durian trees were not, however, a result of some abandoned agriforestry scheme. They were wild, and, as everyone knows, wild trees produce the best fruit. We saved the seeds of the fruits we deemed particularly good and germinated them in black plastic planting bags on the veranda. But, as everyone also knows, durians are not predictable seeders. One can wait the fifteen or twenty years that it takes for a tree to come to maturity, warding off weevils and rusts, watch the first fruits grow from golf-ball to football size, keep vigil with a shotgun over the tree at night, catch the first durian almost before it hits the earth, gently prise open its spiny shell, lift out the first flesh-covered seed, and find that it is hard and dry and bitter. My parents, though, were optimists. They meant to buy some land and plant the seedlings, acres of them, so that at least some of the trees would prove good producers. "Guaranteed by the law of averages," my father insisted, "by the law of probability!" My mother refrained from invoking such occult laws, but made sure to check the seedlings for white ants.

The problem was that we didn't have any money. The government service pays nothing at the best of times, and less than nothing in the forestry department. My mother's parents still bore a grudge against my father for being a mere forester. Hadn't he studied abroad, on a government scholarship, and in the science stream too? Shouldn't he have a big salary to bring home to their daughter? My father's parents disapproved because they knew that every time he went into the jungle he was in danger of meeting with various types of ghosts and spirits, and sooner or later he was sure to come home with an incurable fever. They never came to stay at our house, because it was too close to the jungle. But in the durian season, both sets of grandparents would visit on Sunday afternoons (alternate ones, as they did not approve much of each other either). Then my mother would serve tea and fried bananas, make conversation, and give them durians to take home.

Once the seedlings grew bigger and began to strain against their plastic bags, my mother and I transferred them into pots, 'borrowed' from the forestry department stock. When I tore off the plastic, I could see how the roots of the plants still bound the soil together. The cold, damp earth got under my nails and at school Puan Azira smacked my palms with a wooden ruler to punish me for being dirty. We moved the seedlings off the veranda and built them a shelter in front of the house to shield them from the noon sun Some of the trees got blight, their leaves blistered and

turned brown, but others pushed out new buds and reached up towards the light. In the evenings I watered them, walking with the hose between the aisles, where the toads lurked, living clods of earth with glittering eyes.

By the time I went away to school they were six feet high, but nothing yet, just saplings. Trees age more slowly than people. It was time to do something with them: they needed to be planted in the land we did not have. My father had given each sapling a number, written on a plastic tag girdling its trunk. The numbers were neat, sequential, gave an impression of method, and corresponded to disorderly scrawls in my father's notebook. Each tree had a description documenting the quality, date and occasion of consumption of its parent fruit: "December 5, 1982, afternoon tea (day after Munah took her exams). Light yellow, creamy texture, mild. Makes excellent pulut durian (Ainon says). No rain now for a week."

While I was away at university I didn't see the trees or my parents for several years. When I came back they had moved; my mother's parents had died and left her their house and the five acres of abandoned rubber estate next to it. So when I went home it was to that house, where I'd spent so many Sundays as a child drowsing in the living room, listening to my grandfather tell my father about his other son-in-law, who owned a chilli-sauce factory and was very clever at the stock-market. As it turned out, my uncle lost the factory and a lot of my grandparents' money by gambling on cement futures, which is why my mother inherited the house: a nice brick house with bright blue tiles on the roof. There was a crocheted doily draped over the top of the refrigerator, and in the living room hung the scenes of Mecca painted on velvet that my grandparents had brought back from their pilgrimage. My mother had got a cat, which sat on the warm concrete step at the back of the house and surveyed with its yellow eyes the neighbour's chickens which had straggled into my parents' compound. You could always hear a television on in one of the surrounding houses, or the sound of nails being hammered into plank as someone put up a new partition wall. When I got my job in the city I moved out, because, I told my parents, the bus ride was too long to take twice a day.

But here at last my parents had found a home for their trees. Men from the kampung and a hired tractor had helped my father to rip out every second row of rubber trees, burn the undergrowth and dig it back under. Then he had planted the durian trees. By now they were as tall as the rubber trees, but there was no fruit, not yet, not so much as a blossom. My

father began to fuss with ripening agents and fruition enhancers, drilling holes in the bunk and sending bark samples to the men at Forest Research who had once been his proteges. My mother told him to stop meddling, that the trees would blossom in their own good time. My father thought this very profound and wrote it down in his notebook.

On the Sunday afternoons when I drove in from the city to visit them, he would take me by the arm and steer me up and down the rows of trees, pointing out the newest developments. This one's branch had developed a growth and would have to be lopped, that one was a little too spindly for his liking. "But not long from now, Munah, we will have the flowers, and then, if we are lucky and the rain doesn't knock down the flowers we will have fruit, and if the squirrels don't eat the young fruit—" We will have durians, and those durians will be the best in all the world, better than the small strong Kelantan durians and the deluxe ones flown in from Thailand, and much better than the odourless ones bred by those fools at the agricultural university. He had waited for seven years now and grew restless. "Anybody would think you'd rather have durians than grandchildren," my mother said.

One Sunday we walked again down the cool, rustling avenues of trees, where still the crucial events had failed to take place. In the background I could hear the neighbours' kids screeching and laughing, and a radio playing. My father sighed and shook his head, looking at the unrepentant trees. "We'll go back inside, Munah. Nothing's happening here."

That afternoon, I drove my father and mother back to where we used to live. There was a guardhouse at the entrance to the compound, which was new, but the man on duty was asleep with his feet stuck out of the window of the hut. The road that wound through the reserve was tarred now, and the staff lived not in wooden bungalows but in the adjacent housing estate. Our house was still there, though the roof had fallen in and the pillars leant at precarious angles. Morning glories and the vine with the indigo flowers, which my mother used to use to colour cakes, hung around the veranda like patterned sarongs put out to dry. The jungle had crept upon the house from behind; stealthily, patiently: ferns grew out of the kitchen sink that continued to hang by its piping though the cupboards around it had long since rotted away. The outhouse was invisible in the tangle of bushes. My mother walked up to the house and almost started to climb the steps. "Be careful, Ainon," my father called. He took her arm and they walked to the back of the house without speaking. The crickets screamed just as they always had. Somewhere in

the branches above my head I heard the bird whose three note cry had always sounded to me, when I was little, like it was calling my name: mai-mu-nah, mai-mu-nah. There was a crashing in the treetops and I looked up to see a clan of monkeys swinging higher up into the canopy, calling to each other and berating us furiously. The tiny babies clung to their mothers' fur and stared with the astonishment of the very young. We looked back, necks craned, my father still resting his hand on my mother's elbow, she leaning slightly towards him. At the very tops of the durian trees we could make out clusters of creamy white blossoms, and a faint scent seemed to waft down to us on the ground.

Poetry

Harryette Mullen

Sleeping with the Dictionary

I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion, whose lips are ready to read my shining gloss. A versatile partner. conversant and well-versed in the verbal art, the dictionary is not averse to the solitary habits of the curiously wide-awake reader. In the dark night's insomnia, the book is a stimulating sedative, awakening my tired imagination to the hypnagogic trance of language. Retiring to the canopy of the bedroom, turning on the bedside light, taking the big dictionary to bed, clutching the unabridged bulk, heavy with the weight of all the meanings between these covers, smoothing the thin sheets, thick with accented syllables — all are exercises in the conscious regimen of dreamers, who toss words on their tongues while turning illuminated pages. To go through all these motions and procedures, groping in the dark for an alluring word, is the poet's nocturnal mission. Aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work. Any exit from the logic of language might be an entry in a symptomatic dictionary. The alphabetical order of this ample block of knowledge might render a dense lexicon of lucid hallucinations. Beside the bed, a pad lies open to record the meanderings of migratory words. In the rapid eye movement of the poet's night vision, this dictum can be decoded, like the secret acrostic of a lover's name.

(Facture)

Harryette Mullen

Wino Rhino

For no specific reason I have become one of the city's unicorns. No rare species, but one in range of danger. No mythical animal, but a common creature of urban legend. No potent stallion woven into poetry and song. Just the tough horny beast you may observe, roaming at large in our habitat. I'm known to adventurers whose drive-by safari is this circumscribed wilderness. Denatured photographers like to shoot me tipping the bottle, capture me snorting dust, mount on the wall my horn of empties that spilled the grape's blood. My flesh crawls with itchy insects. My heart quivers as arrows on street maps target me for urban removal. You can see that my hair's stiffened and my skin's thick, but the bravest camera can't document what my armor hides. How I know you so well. Why I know my own strength. Why, when I charge you with my rags, I won't overturn your sporty jeep.

Leonard Jeyam

From "Heightened from Life: My Family as Metaphor"

My Father

During quieter moments
I wonder if sometimes you suddenly sit up
and seek the veins of your palm
desperately and wonder why

your less-than-Dravidian children
only speak their mother's colonial tongue
and not your ancestral one that crowns
the colour of their skin.

Forlorn, your restless thoughts
hurry back to a spinsterish motherland,
a place you've never called home
but perhaps only in the provinces of dreams.

> *There are other worlds*
> *within worlds and the centre*
> *of each of them is a strangely*
> *familiar peace, far away*
>
> *from this oblique one*
> *we live in, like a smallness,*
> *an echo, an irony. We respond*
> *to such ideas with simplicity.*

But such thoughts vanish just as quickly
for I think you subtly know
that she is everywhere,
in a confluence of familiar disguises:

in the cardamoms
and cloves of your spiced tea,
the vinegar in the vindaloo,
the slanting rains and moist winds,

and in so many words of the local lingo
that insulate adopted meanings
yet, in feeling, still resemble
the Old Country.

Just the other afternoon
you saw her lighting a row of oil lamps,
you saw her by the village brook
and heard her anklets and chains

and her devotions, holding captive
the mango tree and honeybee.
With a hibiscus in her left ear
she called out to you, faintly,

murmuring, unresisting,
and an unadorned innocence
blossomed unseen.
In a saree, then in a sarong,

she told you with wave
after wave of acquiescence
that she, under a sky of Malaysian blue,
has always been open to new promises.

You sit there in mother's old rocking chair
reading some of my Naipaul and Hemingway
and some of your religious books peaceably.
Sometimes, I suppose, you are listening

to the gentle musings of a human heart.
Sometimes you are a prayer-boat floating down
the holy Ganges just waiting to touch the feet of God,
my father.

Leonard Jeyam

Legion of Mary

for Wei-Shan

Kneeling in front of you, feeling
that familiar ache or uneasiness

of straddling a pulchritude
both sentient and sublime

(because a member next to you
has just appeared in a pair of shorts),

and looking at you standing on top
of the world with a briar of serpents

under your feet, I've often wondered why
a small group of teenage boys

would gather Saturday after Saturday
to say the rosary amongst themselves

and report good deeds done the past week
and still not seek any kind of reward

but for your abstract approval,
O Lady of Perpetual Assistance?

Leonard Jeyam

Auntie Irene

You have come to haunt me tonight,
standing before the undrawn curtains
in front of the clarifying light
of the streetlamp outside,

dressed as always in your greyish pantsuit
and with a look that tells me
you are about to begin a retelling of one
of your many stories about family foibles,

your arms already poised in the air
(so as to sharpen the point of the drama)
and the shrieks of laughter of all those
around you just about to be heard.

Now if your head were slightly aslant
and your body more gestured, the dream
I keep having of you would have to be
captured on a canvas by Eng Tay.

Antony Johae

Mosque in Kabul

There is snow on the mountain
and the rubble, once a city.
Trees are without leaves
and houses are bared of their beauty
mere stones, mere piles
as are stacks of arms
or heaps of shot
or collected bodies after bombardment
when factions have faced each other
and the firing has stopped.

Yet there's a mosque that's whole
in the detritus of war
its twin minarets mounting to a stark sky
its cupola arched over the prayerful
and portal open to the faithful
for quintuple praise.
The fabric's not touched by shells
nor seems troubled by men's struggles.
Only the faeces of pied pigeons
on broad roof or dome
spot it, perhaps beyond element,
with a quintessence.

Susanna Checketts

Mozart Violin Sonata K376 on a Sunday

piano, send an archetypal stream
through a compound tidy with hens
and golden flitters in and out
of open ardent wooden windows;

sonatas go best in the tropics
flowing under the see-all sun
without too ominous a swell
or the grand threat that takes us

somewhere out to sea, sobbing and threshing.
if you thought up, conjured, a symphony
it would charge the air
with so much heat and dust, the primal note

could crack our farmyard certainties
collapse us into a torrent
a flood of perfect passion
with Noah on top of his ark

like a pale toy patriarch, disapproving
and the kindly white dove
that rhymes with falling water
now spies for a green branch

sees her bill refracted like a blade
dives for that deceptive greenery
and changes her outward nature
coming up black with power.

no, back to sonata streams –
the controlled pleasure of a smile
to friends and passing swallows –
this is weekend music; let it flow discreetly.

Harryette Mullen

Suzuki Method

El Nino brought a typhoon of tom-toms from Tokyo, where a thrilling instrument makes an ok toy. Tiny violins are shrill. Their shrieks are musical mice. The color of a mechanical clock is lost in translation. Whatever you're telling me sounds like the straight teeth of rodents. My dreams throw the book at the varmint. We both shudder as the dictionary thuds. You've got to admit, our Esperanto's hopeless. Your virgin is unfaithful. My savory hero boards the ship of Marco Polo, loaded with soy from Ohio.

(Parnassus)

Harryette Mullen

Dim Lady

My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon. Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser. If Liquid Paper is white, her knobs are institutional beige. If her mop were Slinkys, dishwater Slinkys would grow on her noggin. I have seen tablecloths in Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug. And in some mintyfresh mouthwashes there is more sweetness than in the garlic breeze my mainsqueeze wheezes. I love to hear her rap, yet I'm aware that Muzak has a hipper beat. I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. My ball and chain is plain from head to toe. And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious Twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any platinum idol or lanky model who's been hyped beyond belief.

(Gare du Nord, Alice Notley & Douglas Oliver)

Shalini Teresa Fernandez

Firehorses

They would have erased us
you and I,
children of fire and speed,
back then in the old days.
After the first cry
and the first disappointing
glimpse of our secret sex,
they would have
pushed our faces
into a trough of ashes
or left us without,
howling against the marble moon.
We are the horror
of fire consuming,
runaway horses,
refusing bit and bridle
the master's weight
in the saddle,
proud juggernauts
trampling well-kept fields,
setting plains ablaze
with sparking hooves
eyes drawn to
the vanishing point
on the horizon.

Shalini Teresa Fernandez

Childhood

Thin gold-horned unicorn
now broken-pegged –
my childhood traced
in the fragile clean lines
of your transparency.
Lucid, clear, my eye
sees through you
my hand – dark and lined
even as it picks you up
to throw you away

(Feb 2001)

Identity, Culture and the National Narrative: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

Shirley Lim's first novel continues many of the chief concerns that characterise her body of writings, which to-date comprises several collections of poetry, short fiction and academic articles, as well as a book of memoirs. The perplexities of constructing identity across cultures and continents, the dislocations wrought by history, issues of gender and race and the complexities of interpersonal relationships all return here, as extended meditations, and provide the rich complex of ideas out of which Lim structures her first novel.

Joss and Gold is a novel whose three parts are separated, but only tenuously, by "geography and the distance of cultures". The novel's cultural and temporal locations span the Malaysian federal capital of Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s, leading up to the turbulent political events of 1969, New York State a little over a decade later, in 1980, and Singapore in 1981. This narrative cartography of crosscutting movements and affiliations itself recalls the instability of ground that features prominently in the author's life story. Born in Malacca, in British-colonial Malaya, educated in Kuala Lumpur and the United States, the latter of which has been academic base and one of several spaces she has claimed as her home (the others being Malaysia and Singapore) for the last thirty years or so, and currently a Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Lim knows too well the particular tensions and pains, but also perhaps the gains, attendant on a life given to erecting home on the broken continuity of locations.

Not surprisingly, then, the novel's three sections – "Crossing", "Circling" and "Landing"— call attention to the processes of movement and transit, the blurring of boundaries. Indeed, throughout the novel, Lim appears to privilege the dynamics of cultural change, adjustment and negotiation over those of stasis and determinacy. But perhaps more

importantly *Joss and Gold* is simply about the connections that bind human beings, to themselves and to others, within and across different times and different spaces.

The novel opens in Kuala Lumpur in the year 1968. The governing consciousness of this part of the narrative belongs to Li An, Lim's protagonist, a headstrong and independent-minded Malaysian woman of Chinese ancestry. A fresh graduate of the University of Malaya, she tutors in the English department of the same university, a teacher of English literature at a particularly critical period in the fledgling life of her nation. She is married to the dull but dependable scientist, Henry Yeh, with whom Li An, still fleeing the demons of her deprived childhood, shares a life of secure, if not always fulfilling, domesticity. Li An's best friends, from her university days, are Gina and Ellen, graduates in Economics and History respectively, and, like her, young Malaysian women of Chinese descent. Li An's interaction with these characters and their lives traces the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of an urbanised, English-speaking, middle-class Malaysian subjectivity, a subjectivity formed, in part, by the legacy of migrant displacements engendered by colonial policies as well as by values inherited from the nation's colonialist history.

The tenuous equilibrium Li An constructs around her life is disturbed when she meets Chester Brookfield, the Princeton-educated Peace Corps volunteer who comes to serve a two-year term in Malaysia. A stark contrast to her staid and conservative husband, the adventurous Chester epitomizes to the restless Li An all the romance and possibilities of America, "where everything is happening". More significantly, he is the foreigner in her midst through whose reactions to the incendiary politics of race and identity in Malaysia Li An is forced to confront and examine her own sense of cultural otherness.

To the American's not-wholly playful gibe that the teaching of British literature has no part in politically independent Malaysia, Li An, although outwardly defensive of her position, is called upon to reassess the relevance of Shakespearean sonnets, part of the colonial legacy that the English-educated like her have inherited, to the concerns of the young Malaysian nation still grappling with the vexed dynamics of national and cultural-identity construction. Further told by Chester that language is a carrier of culture and that in teaching British literature she is in fact imparting British values, images and ideological assumptions to her students, Li An, reeling from the devastating effects of such a discourse

on her young consciousness, begins to feel a gradual and growing estrangement from the poetry she loves and teaches.

Also significant, Li An's contact with Chester, and through him, her acquaintance with Abdullah, the soft-spoken journalist turned fire-brand nationalist, and the broadcaster Samad, exposes her to views and perspectives outside that of her immediate circle of friends. Ahmad and Samad, representatives, in the novel, of the politically-hegemonic Malay community, are desirous of eradicating every sign of their nation's colonial past and constructing a new and autonomous national identity. Topping this task of national reconstruction is the renunciation of English. As Abdullah tells Li An, English is a "bastard language", unrooted to the soil, a colonial imposition that should have been thrown out with the colonizers after Independence in 1957. Concomitant to its explicit renunciation of the colonizer's language and culture is the desire by the dominant community to construct a national imaginary on its own terms. As Abdullah pens it in his editorials, "There was only one kind of people that counted ... [and] anyone who disagreed should be imprisoned or sent back to China or India". To indigenous Malay insistence that her migrant history is incompatible with the national idea of Malaysia, Li An finds herself asking, "Are the Chinese not true Malaysians?". Indeed it is the haunting overtones of the protagonist's impassioned assertion that she is "not Chinese but Malaysian", that "[e]verything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak", fashioned as a response to hegemonic and homogenizing national formations, that sustain the narrative of the novel's first part. Already unable to reconcile her love of Wordsworth and Keats, Herbert and Donne with the nature of events overtaking her country, Li An is now, on the basis of her different cultural history, relegated to the status of an outsider in her own land. "You cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you", she avers. "How could you not grow roots, invisible filaments of attachment that tied you down to a ground, a source of water?". Rootlessness and dislocation, home and psychic alienation. Ever the chronicler of precarious belonging, Lim, calling upon the complexities of a personal predicament, reveals, with insight and compassion, the instabilities lying at the heart of diaspora.

Into this psychological maelstrom, Lim weaves the events of May 13 1969, the stark emblem of the fissured unities of Malaysian nationhood. On that day, racial clashes broke out in the capital following Malay insecurity over the massive victory by the mostly Chinese-led opposition

in the General Elections. The politically dominant Malay community, already insecure about its weak economic standing, felt threatened by the political inroads made by the economically-superior Chinese. Ethnic tensions culminated in the riots, an orgy of killing that lasted a few days. May 13 1969 proved to be the most significant event in the history of the Malaysian nation for it provoked radical modifications to the political, economic and social life of the nation, underscoring, in blood, the particular implications of race, rights and privileges to the peoples of Malaysia.

Lim utilizes the cataclysm of the riots not only to echo the internal contradictions that make her protagonist waver between her loyalty to Henry and her feral longings for Chester. More importantly, in casting the riots as a pivotal episode in the text, Lim is pointing towards a recognition of the reality of the fractious internal space of the nation, with its contending multiplicity of voices, histories, cultures, interests and perspectives, a sense of which the text had already sought to convey through its dialogic construction of events leading up to the riots. Central, therefore, to the novel's thematic is that it is on the night of the May 13 riots in Kuala Lumpur, with "race, religion, language, the whole divisiveness of the country going off like strings of firecrackers" around them, that Li An and Chester are thrown together. This one shared night results in Li An becoming pregnant. Due to the mayhem in the aftermath of the riots, Li An, the vortex of her life fast spinning out of control, is unable to communicate news of her pregnancy to Chester, who leaves behind the confusions of his Malaysian experience for America ahead of the completion of his contract.

But while the novel suggests that the story of the "national" life of Malaysia cannot really be told without taking into account the events of May 13 1969, the emphasis throughout is on the intertwining of public and private narratives, the political and the personal. To this end, the larger narrative of national history is inextricably interwoven with the biography of the characters which is being told. The messy violence of the streets, for instance, is not just something happening "out there". When a riotous Malay mob breaks into the home of Li An's father-in-law, a successful businessman, and kills him brutally, Li An is forced to confront the cost, in personal terms, of the internecine politics of racial hatred and prejudice being played out in the public arena. Gina's doomed relationship with Paroo, a Punjabi-Hindu, is another strand that contributes to the larger narrative of race in Malaysia. Fearful that Paroo's family will disapprove

of his choice of wife and that her own conservative Chinese family will find out about their affair, Gina commits suicide; Paroo survives the attempt but is forever haunted by the memory of his first, true, love. Again, in the text, the sites of personal and national trauma coalesce.

The novel's second section opens in 1981, a little over a decade later, in Westchester County, New York. Chester Brookfield is now Professor of Anthropology at a private American college and this part of the novel charts his domestic life with Meryl, his ambitious Columbia-educated wife, and his socializing with friends and fellow academics. Meryl's insistence that her husband has a vasectomy propels Chester into a reluctant journey back to his past, to thoughts about the child he had fathered in his Peace Corps days (it is through his Malaysian friend, Paroo, that Chester had learnt that Li An's child is his). The newly-vasectomized Chester, for whom the prospect of fathering any children in the future is now impossible, decides to return to Malaysia, that dark, messy area of his unacknowledged past. Chester's readiness to return to Southeast Asia and assume responsibility for his past actions, though at this stage he appears to be motivated more by curiosity and self-interest rather than responsibility, paves the way for his entry into Singapore and the novel's third part.

The third section, "Landing", sees Li An as a successful career woman who has moved to Singapore for "big city tolerance and anonymity" after the scandal of her failed marriage to Henry, who had left her immediately after discovering that the baby his wife had just delivered is clearly not a child he has fathered. Having cut herself off from her Malaysian past, and all its vicissitudes, Li An, now editor-in-chief of a successful news bulletin, has built a life of routine and unruffled contentment for herself and her daughter, Suyin, with the help of Henry's step-mother, Mrs Yeh, and her best friend, Ellen, also Suyin's godmother.

The arrival in Singapore of Chester, however, forces Li An to come out of the cocoon of cultivated silences she has spun around her past, particularly on the matter of Suyin's paternity. Chester's presence, in implicitly forcing her to face up to Suyin's heretofore unvoiced need to seek clarification about her history, compels Li An to return to her past, to the night of Suyin's conception, "that past ... [that] had remained invisible to everyone who knew her now, shut down by the news blackout of twelve years ago, by censorship still unlifted despite the young and old historians". Just as May 13 1969 has been censored from official history because the contending ethnic differences which sparked the riots serve to undermine nationalist historiography's hegemonic narrative of a

unitary national identity, Li An has excised the night of the riots, and its troubling, hybrid, consequences, from her memory. Like the deliberately imposed silence after the riots, the facts about Suyin's paternity are also shrouded in silence. Unvoiced and unrepresented, May 13 1969 has become, in both private and public archives, "an unmemorable memory".

Thus, by making the protagonist go back to her silenced past, by making her give it voice and compelling her to acknowledge the reality of the contentious circumstances surrounding her daughter's conception, Lim's text recuperates the multiple histories of individuals and their nations. In the narrative, Li An's daughter, the green-eyed, brown-haired Suyin, is the hybrid heir, through her mixed parentage, to her nation's heterogeneous — colonial, migrant and inter-national — histories. Her role in the text is thus clearly a symbolic one. The text suggests that postcolonial Malaysian identity is a matter of rich and complex negotiation, that it cannot simply follow the linear and unitary trajectory of nationalist definitions.

Crucially, then, *Joss and Gold* rejects the move to suppress the nation's multiple histories by suggesting the impossibility of transcending one's cultural past, of rising above history, as the protagonist had once thought it possible. Our last image of her in the novel, which is fittingly also the concluding scene in Lim's narrative, is of Li An reading from a long stowed-away copy of The *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, its pages "yellowed and turned brittle" with age. The book, the only one Li An had kept behind from her university days, is, in the text, a symbol of Li An's past, a past which metaphorically represents her migrant history, construed by official discourse as being in conflict with national constructions. It is this troubling past that a confused Li An had sought to efface through the burning of her English literature books and by the act of uprooting from Malaysia. But finally now, reading aloud from Hopkins, revelling in the long-ago rhythms of her past and making her different experiences connect with each other, Li An comes to realize that "nothing she lived through was ever finally over". Indeed, the novel suggests that the recovery of the past is the first, and a necessary, step towards personal, and national, recovery.

Lim's novel, however, is not without its flaws. The American section is overdrawn; there is unnecessary and undue emphasis on the specificities of American domestic and intellectual life. Although it is undeniably Lim's intention to evoke the particular ambience of American national and cultural life through this wide assortment of characters and their

interconnecting narratives, so that the texture of the American section is distinct from the Malaysian narrative and the Sinified Singapore context, it must be said that there are far too many secondary characters in this section whose presence does not contribute much, if anything at all, to the central narrative of events. It must also be said that despite her deft evocation of the Malaysian context, her rendition of the English spoken by some of her Malaysian characters is somewhat unfaithful to its context. While Lim's intention here is to convey distinctly Malay(sian) cultural patterns and thought processes, in contrast to the Americanised idiom and prose of the second part, it is inconceivable that University-educated Malays like Abdullah and Samad, and Indians like Paroo, children of the 1950s, would have spoken ungrammatical English of the kind they are portrayed as speaking in the novel.

That said, Joss *and Gold* is a welcome and, given its themes, a necessary and significant addition to the steadily expanding body of Malaysian and Singaporean literatures in English. It is fitting that Lim's narrative of home, written over twenty years and imbued with the dynamics of flux and flows commensurate with the multivalent locations inhabited by the author during that period, should constantly call attention to the crossing of boundaries. Perhaps this is the most significant of the novel's ways of acknowledging that the presence of *other* cultures, histories and realities is always already a part of the national story.

"I don't want East, I don't want West": An Analysis of Haresh Sharma's *Rosnah*

Susan Philip

Robert Yeo recalls his first arrival in England in 1966, where he was "...confronted by this notion of identity and I found out that my cultural identity was very mixed. I felt incomplete as the new Singaporean" (Yeo 133). This was an admission that, culturally at least, Singapore had not found an identity. Its identity, such as it was, was a jangling, uneasy mish-mash of East and West, with a greater tendency towards the West. As Yeo points out, "I could sing lots of American and British songs....Was I able to recite a *pantun*? I couldn't. Was I able to sing a Chinese ditty? I couldn't" (Yeo 133). He was a Singaporean, but unable to say what *made* him Singaporean.

After more than 30 years, how much has this situation changed? Yeo's dilemma was, partly, founded on an inability to function culturally as an Asian, let alone a Singaporean. Comments by Alvin Tan (of The Necessary Stage) about the state of local theatre in the 1980s suggest that there was still a strong leaning towards the West. "The environment then," he says, "was not supportive of the development of the local play....The local play was considered too raw and did not attract audiences" (Tan, "A Necessary Practice," 251). But theatre practitioners, at least, "were tired of hearing Singaporean actors faking an accent on stage" and so, became more actively involved in "a more progressive search for expression in Singapore theatre" (Tan 251). But what they express still reflects a profound confusion about identity, as individuals struggle to negotiate the gaps between ethnic, cultural, national, and religious identities.

My intention in this article is to examine Haresh Sharma's play *Rosnah* (first staged in 1995), as an expression of this confusion. Rosnah is a native of Singapore, but what does this really mean? We come back to Yeo's dilemma – what makes Rosnah a Singaporean? William Peterson points out that "Singaporeans have no natural cultural cohesiveness that comes

from shared traditions" (51):

> The absence of a strong group identity prior to independence, when combined with the country's rich linguistic and cultural mix, have made it difficult for the country's leaders to create a sense that all Singaporeans share core elements that constitute a common, national identity.
>
> (51)

Has the Singaporean identity (whether national or cultural) developed to a point where it can provide Rosnah with a framework within which to place herself?

Obviously any conclusions I draw will not be the truth for all Singaporeans, but they will also not be without significance. The play is about a Malay Singaporean woman, and her feelings of alienation and confusion. Rosnah can be seen as a doubly marginalised person: first as a Malay in Singapore, then as a foreigner in London. Her dilemma can be read as an examination of a question of pressing importance to Singaporeans. Does her cultural identity provide her with some sense of completeness, that which Yeo found lacking in himself?

The way in which the play was created is significant. It is a devised play, a collaboration between Sharma, director Alvin Tan, and actress Alin Mosbit. The script is based in part on a journal Alin kept during a stay in Glasgow. The character of Rosnah was created during improvisations based on this journal. The transcriptions of these improvisations were then sent to Sharma who, says Tan, "wrote the first draft of the script, contributing his feelings and perceptions of living in a foreign country for a period of time....When *Rosnah* was re-staged in November 1996, I could give my input of staying away from Singapore" (Sharma x). Thus, although apparently dealing with the dilemma of one Malay woman, it also encompasses the experiences of the Indian playwright and the Chinese director – a neat, though doubtless unintentional, cross-section of Singapore's three main races. These three members of three disparate races are united by a common experience; ironically, it is the experience of displacement and foreignness.

In Singapore in 1967, Dr. Goh Keng Swee (who was Minister of Defence at the time) spoke to the audience at a variety concert, giving them his take on what should be the subject matter and central concerns of plays written by Singaporeans (and presumably about Singapore). His prescriptions were exacting and well-nigh impossible to follow if one was serious about writing vital and engaging drama. One particular suggestion

stands out, because it seems to encapsulate the dilemma Singaporeans have faced in trying to build a cultural identity. Inundated with strong influences from a plethora of cultures, what do they choose? According to Dr. Goh, Singaporean plays "must discard the crazy, sensual, ridiculous, boisterous and over materialistic style of the West. In the same way the feudalistic superstitions, ignorant and pessimistic forces of the East are equally repugnant" (qtd. in Birch 32). This prescription suggests that there are clear dividing lines in Eastern and Western culture between what is "good" and what is "bad", and Singaporeans should have the wisdom to select only what is good, while vigorously rejecting all that is "repugnant", even if it is a deeply ingrained part of their culture.

But this begs another question – what exactly is Singaporean culture? A leader in *The Straits Times* of 13 January 1968 suggested that since Singapore was a multicultural society, it would be "desirable to protect those forces that help to preserve the identity of the various traditional cultures from which new ones can be born" (Birch 33). This seems a rather blithe solution, made in the heady atmosphere of independence and the consequent search for a national identity. And again, it suggests that clear demarcation lines can be drawn. But from a more practical viewpoint, in a new land that is physically cut off from the original centre of a particular culture (Indian or Chinese culture, for example), how is that culture to be preserved? With each subsequent generation, a little bit of that culture gets lost (as has, by and large, proven to be the case in Singapore and Malaysia). And surely when a new culture is born, it moves even further away from that original.

Perhaps Singaporean theatre practitioner Kuo Pao Kun puts it most clearly, when he suggests that Singapore is a "cultural orphan" (Kuo 117), searching fruitlessly for a parent:

> I think when people begin to ask, "Who are we?" they begin this promotion of different cultures. But as an ethnic Chinese, you can't go back to China. As an ethnic Indian, you can't go back to India. Even if you are a Malay here, where do you go? To Malaysia? Indonesia?
>
> Also, we have borrowed so much from the European civilisation, but are we Europeans? We cannot be.
>
> So who are we? I mean, we are cut away. We are descendants of these people, but we are also orphans looking for a parentage, and that parentage can only be a multiple one. You can only recreate a parentage that cannot be any one of these, but an integration of all.
>
> (Kuo 117)

There is a certain concordance between what Kuo says, and what is said by Dr. Goh and *The Straits Times* leader. Any building of culture and identity in a country like Singapore must of necessity be a process of blending, assimilating and discarding. But Kuo is more realistic because he realises that Singaporeans (even the indigenous Malays) are in fact *cut off* from their parent cultures. They cannot return to them as a means of support because in Singapore, they have been diluted by contact with other cultures. So the only way to move towards a new culture, one that may be identifiably Singaporean, is (as Kuo suggests) to create something that is an integration. Writer Colin Cheong suggests that this has happened; when asked if he feels that he is a Chinese, he replied that "I am Singaporean. That is the way we like to say it. We synthesised an identity" (Cheong 331). But I feel that his reply is a little pat, suggesting as it does that considerations of race and culture have been set aside, and that a new transcendent identity has been embraced.

At a seminar in Canberra, Australia (in July 2001), poet Alvin Pang expressed the same sort of opinion, that race does not particularly factor into modern considerations in Singapore. Yet he and others who share this opinion are refuted by writers such as Alfian Sa'at of Teater Ekamatra, who vividly expresses the alienation he feels as a Malay in Singapore. In an interview with Sherry Siebel, Alfian shares his thoughts on identity:

> Basically there's a very strong sense of identity crisis in Singapore. But I'm not a purist when it comes to culture. Culture and language evolves. I don't really care if my future wife doesn't sing *gurindams* to my future baby! But I feel Malay culture isn't acknowledged by "cultural purists" and is relegated to a sub-culture.
>
> (Siebel 23)

Alfian echoes Prime Minister Goh, who states that "...Singapore is not yet a nation. It is only a state, a sovereign entity...[whose survival] will depend on whether the different races can gel as one people, feel as one people and pulsate with the same Singaporean heartbeat" (qtd. in Peterson 53). Alfian is willing to relinquish some cultural purity – but what he feels is that his culture has, willy-nilly, been pushed aside and ignored. How is he to "pulsate with the...Singaporean heartbeat", when a significant part of him, i.e. his culture, is "relegated to a sub-culture"?

He makes a bitter reference to his marginalisation within his own homeland, in his poem "Hang Nadim Speaks". The poem refers to a legendary Malay hero, who saved Singapore from being attacked by a garfish, but received only death as a reward:

...My mouth
Was so large it could have
Swallowed the sea. And I did,
Even though in all the records
They only mentioned how
It was the sea that swallowed me.

(Alfian Sa'at 60)

Hang Nadim's heroism has been forgotten, swallowed by the sea. In the same way, the poem suggests, the heroic past and culture of the Malays have also been swallowed. At the same time that it revivifies the Malay past by retelling this ancient story, the poem undercuts past heroism, by underlining their present-day relegation to the margins of myth and history.

While it is true that most Singaporeans, and indeed most Malaysians, do consider themselves to be Singaporeans and Malaysians, it is equally true that the majority of Malaysians and Singaporeans also continue to further define themselves by race. This is a consideration that has come up in some of Suchen Christine Lim's work. Ronald Klein points out that she writes of people she calls "the 'New Asians'; Chinese who can't speak Chinese, Indians who can't speak Tamil. Yet they are still locked into their ethnic forms. They must marry an Indian, they must marry a Chinese, etc." (Lim 213). Lim refutes this by pointing out that one of her characters, a Catholic boy, marries a Malay girl and therefore has to convert to Islam – an example of someone breaking out of the locked ethnic (or in this case religious) form. But she goes on to say that the Malay girl in question "doesn't fall within the so-called traditional Muslim woman. She is English-educated" (Lim 213). It seems that they are able to "meet", so to speak, only because the girl has broken out of the mould. Putting aside the legalities of marrying a Muslim person, there is no sense that there could have been any kind of coming together, if each had maintained his or her racial/religious identity. The Catholic boy has to renounce his religion; admittedly the Muslim girl does not give up her religion in a legal sense, but the suggestion is that because of her "English" education she has stopped adhering strictly to its ideologies. So we come back to the idea of integration, but an integration that can only be achieved if there is a concomitant sacrifice of the original culture.

While everything points towards integration, it is an idea more readily embraced by the generation born around the 1960s or after. The previous generations, somewhat more closely linked to the original cultures, are

also more opposed to integration. They have tried to pass their ideas of maintaining cultural purity on to their children. These children, however, faced with the reality of a multicultural, multiracial society (and not having really known any *other* kind of society), have trouble reconciling these conflicting ideas of homogeneity and heterogeneity.

The confusion thus engendered is clearly visible in the character of Rosnah. Alvin Tan notes that "*Rosnah* represents the journey of a Singaporean away from home, living in a foreign culture" (Tan Introduction x), but this play can also be read as a journey into this particular Singaporean person, who is forced to question what it means to be an Asian, a Singaporean, and most especially a Malay Muslim Singaporean. Rosnah's distance from Singapore (she is studying in London) may allow her to look at her homeland and her family with a more critical eye. But her being away from them, without the support provided by society and family, forces her to take steps outward that she would otherwise never have contemplated. Her struggle to conform to her family's desires and expectations puts her into conflict with her immediate surroundings. The fact that as a modern Singaporean her upbringing has been more "integrated" than that of her parents or grandmother gives her the ability to fit into this alien culture, should she try – but because her immediate familial framework has been monocultural and monoreligious, she feels that 'adaptation' is a kind of betrayal of her religion and race. What Sharma's play ultimately shows is that this "integration", this "Singaporeanisation" of the Singaporean, has not been fully realised, and that optimistic pronouncements such as those made by Colin Cheong are somewhat facile.

In Sharma's play, we see the dilemma of Rosnah, possessor of a mixed cultural identity, who is still pressured by her family to live as though she belongs to a singular, monolithic culture. Stylistically, the playwright dramatically expresses her psychic confusion by rejecting the traditional exposition-climax-denouement structure; instead Rosnah goes back and forth in time, from the present to her childhood and back again. The play also engages with an even more distant past, when the story of the legendary heroine Siti Zubaidah is narrated. *Rosnah* is a monologue, in the sense that there is only one actress; however she takes on many roles – she plays herself (i.e. the Actress), but she is not really being herself: rather, an actress is playing another character called the Actress. She must also play Rosnah, Rosnah's friend Muslinda, Rosnah's grandmother, and even Siti Zubaidah. This shifting back and forth in time, and back and

forth between different characters, allows Sharma to explore Rosnah's dilemma from a variety of angles. It also mirrors her own lack of firm foundations, as she casts back and forth, through time and space, to find some kind of sense in her life.

Commenting on the various stages of development through which this play went, Tan frequently uses words suggesting fracture: in its "final" form, at a production staged in Melbourne in 1997, he notes that the play "was even more fragmented and intertextual" (Tan 263). Intertextuality came in the form of multi-media additions that offered comment on the Malay experience in Singapore, without being directly linked to the plot, thus widening the individual, personal references.

Tan and Sharma do not reach after a manufactured expression of unity. Rather, they use this intertextuality and sense of fracture to broaden and deepen the exploration of what is already there. As Tan points out, the process of "exploration was for the form to realise the complexities of the issues and themes embedded in the story" (263). The device of using one actress to portray all the characters might seem to suggest unity – especially when Rosnah is told that Nenek, the Actress and Siti Zubaidah are all a part of her. But because the actress is required to actually have dialogues with herself (rather than, as in the case of most monologues, creating other characters through narration and reminiscence), she will appear fractured, even schizophrenic. The flux and confusion of the play's form reflect Rosnah's own state of uncertainty – and by extension, the uncertainty of identity in Singapore.

The opening words of the play suggest the theme. Rosnah says "Transit. I'm in transit. You know, where you change plane... where you can't move because your hand luggage is so heavy...transit..." (Sharma 171). Literally in transit, because she's changing planes on her way to London, Rosnah is also figuratively in transit, moving between cultures. Literally and figuratively she is in the process of moving and yet, as she says, she "can't move" because her "hand luggage [emotional/cultural baggage] is so heavy". She feels a strong sense of being weighed down by her cultural and religious background.

Sharma immediately contrasts her with Muslinda, her old school friend, who now prefers to be known as "Linda". Muslinda has picked up a more "London" way of speaking, which still has an underlay of Singapore ("I know I'm a bit what" [171]). But she clearly feels that she is no longer quite Malay; asking Rosnah not to be angry with her she says "So, as the Malays say, 'jangan marah'" (172); note that she distances herself

from her own race by not saying "as *we* say". Her mantra is, "we have changed countries, now we have to change cultural practices". And it would seem that in order to do so, she must also disown her ethnic and cultural background.

Rosnah's attitude to her is shocked and somewhat scornful; she dismisses her as an "[e]xotic Asian brunette....that Miss Venezuela," and implies also that her morals are somewhat loose (171). Rosnah's mantra, unlike Muslinda's, is "don't become like Mus...don't become like Mus..." (171). Rosnah's scoffing dismissal of Muslinda emphasises Muslinda's foreignness; having left her country, she appears also to have left behind her identity as a Singaporean, as well as the moral values that her cultural-religious framework supposedly supplies. The ease, indeed eagerness, with which she does this, implies that her framework is very flimsy, a mere house of cards.

Later in the play, Muslinda obliquely tells Rosnah that she has been raped, and Rosnah bursts into a tirade against Muslinda's "immorality":

> ROSNAH: You have no moral. You have no duty. Tak malu.
> Takda maruah! Tak ingat tuhan! Dah lupa ugama!
> Dah sesat! What to do now? What can anyone do?
> I told you. I told you right? I told you! Don't anyhow
> blame this country or that country. Don't be a coward.
> Look at yourself first!
>
> (188)

It is all too easy for Rosnah to blame Muslinda herself for the rape: after all, she has so far forgotten her religious and cultural edicts about modesty as to invite a man to her home, thus suggesting that she is "available". According to popular cultural wisdom, "she asked for it", and this is the strident, hysterical tone Rosnah takes. Her reaction is odd when we consider that Muslinda has told her about the rape in a way that suggests that she blames no one, and intends to move on (though this might not be as positive and pro-active as it sounds: she immediately offers Rosnah some grass). She certainly has not blamed "this country or that country". Rather, this reaction seems to be sparked by Rosnah's own confusion, as she feels torn between her family and her English fiancé. She sees Muslinda's rape as a direct result of her having forsaken the modesty required of her as a Muslim woman; and she has forsaken that modesty because "You have to change. You're not in Singapore. So, don't behave like you are" (172). Is Rosnah on the verge of taking the same path?

Rosnah is fearful of beginning a relationship with Stephen, an Englishman who rescues her from a ravenous flock of pigeons, because such a relationship has no place in her avowed scheme of things. Taking their relationship to a more serious level would be tantamount to disowning her culture and becoming another Muslinda. Underlying and emphasising her confusion, is the pressure that simply being a Singaporean Malay puts on her: Rosnah feels that she, as a Malay girl, has been given an opportunity to help her race better itself, and to ignore this opportunity would be irresponsible; "When I go back," she states, "I must contribute to society" (176). But Sharma undercuts her apparent conviction by immediately making the actress take over, in her role as Actress, to mimic and obliquely mock Rosnah's ambitions:

> ACTRESS: [*Mimicking Rosnah.*] I must join Mendaki. Mendaki is not doing enough. How come so many Malay boys still don't do A-levels? How come so few go to university? I must give tuition under Mendaki. Teach children. Join AMP. I want... I want to be like Datuk Seri Paduka Rafidah Aziz, Malaysian Minister of Trade and Industry.
>
> (176)

With the actress's mocking intonation, all these fine phrases sound like hollow mouthings, unconvinced and unconvincing repetitions of phrases from political speeches and newspaper features. It also touches on another sore point among the Malays in Singapore, namely the government's contention that Singapore is a meritocracy. Alfian Sa'at finds this contention unfair and somewhat insulting:

> I think it's very unfair to the Malays. It's very unfair that we're being told it's completely meritocratic where there are no Malay fighter pilots. It undermines the whole race if you say it's meritocracy, because it means you are too dumb to climb up the ranks. At least acknowledge it, and give us our self-esteem.
>
> (Siebel 23)

Rosnah is in England, apparently filled with the desire to help her people, but her sense of mission seems shaky, even empty. Could her sense of uncertainty stem from her awareness of the unacknowledged "glass ceiling" (Alfian Sa'at, qtd. in Siebel 23) with which she will have to deal? Whether from a personal or a social perspective, Rosnah seems not to receive the strength she needs from her cultural identity. And it is ironic

that in order to find a suitable role model (a successful and powerful Malay woman), the actress has to go to a foreign country, namely Malaysia.

Rosnah seeks solace and stability in her race and her religion, but neither provides what she seeks. After a disturbing encounter with a panhandler, Rosnah rushes back to her room, performs her ritual ablutions, and prays – she is seeking strength and comfort in her religion. But so unsettled is she that she breaks down: "I looked at my hands, still shaking, and suddenly... suddenly... I just cried" (179). Speaking (in her imagination) to her grandmother, Rosnah says "Faith and belief. That is all I have. And I never question. Like a ritual. Like patterns in a cloud. They repeat but they are never the same. And I am standing on the clouds, trying to catch the smoke" (184). Clearly, her faith is as unstable, as ephemeral, as clouds and smoke.

This idea of the ephemeral and transient is also brought out by the motif of the camera and photographs. The Actress has a Polaroid camera, which she uses to take pictures of the audience, and Rosnah has a vision of her grandmother taking photographs of clouds. The act of photography suggests an attempt to fix what is transient and transitory: if a picture is taken of a cloud, that picture will always be there, even after the cloud has disappeared. But here, no sense of fixity is achieved. The Actress may take pictures of the audience, but there will still be a different audience every night, and the picture does not fully recreate the physical being. Nenek tries to give Rosnah a sense of being grounded or rooted in her religion and culture – but for Rosnah, these attempts have turned out to be futile. She comes back again to the image of being in transit, of waiting to go somewhere, while being unable to move.

Here, we must return to Dr. Goh's prescriptions for Singapore drama, in which good and bad, East and West, can be selectively picked over to create some perfect hybrid. Clearly, this has not yet happened. Nenek is still rooted within her culture and religion, drawing on her upbringing in Malaysia to give her a sense of place. It is also worth noting that the Singapore of Nenek's time was not as different from Malaysia as it is today. Essentially, Nenek's world did not change. Her mother gave her some advice in the form of a *pantun*, which she then passed on to Rosnah. Rosnah roughly translates it thus: "If you know how to take care of yourself...even if you throw stones they will never sink" (174). However, the Malay words "Jika pandai membawa diri" have an added dimension suggesting that one must know how to carry oneself correctly and with *modesty*. Stick to your values, the pantun suggests, and all will be well. For Nenek, the

pantun was both meaningful and relevant, because her social, religious and cultural references remained constant. Unlike Rosnah, she was never in transit.

Nenek, Siti Zubaidah, and Rosnah have something in common: all are travellers, though only Rosnah is unable to reach her destination. The Actress relates their travels to the Islamic concept of *Hijrah*. She quotes from a religious commentary which says "Migration in the way of Allah is the highest act, because the person leaves behind all that he loves. One tries to change a situation and to improve it; when one cannot, then one must leave it behind" (181 – 182). The instruction seems clear enough – if Rosnah cannot change or improve the situation at home (i.e. her family's reaction to Stephen), she should leave. But her social and cultural framework militates against this step, telling her that she cannot leave Singapore and her family, reminding her of familial and social responsibilities. Where Nenek and Siti Zubaidah are filled with personal conviction about the positive aspects of their migrations, Rosnah experiences elemental confusion, unable to decide if she should migrate.

She is, as she says, "grounded" – not in the sense of being firmly rooted and filled with a sense of personal conviction, but more in the sense of being stuck, of being able only to "stay in one place and do one thing" (184). She begins to question this groundedness – it is one of the things that holds her back from saying yes to Stephen's proposal. She cannot have a relationship with him, because she has to go back to Singapore, to her family; Nenek asks, "Husband wife stay where?... London? Singapore? Changi Airport? Stay inside the plane" (184). To marry Stephen would condemn Rosnah to a lifetime of being in transit, neither here nor there. Unsure of her position and identity in her home, how can she find a position or identity in a foreign country?

After Muslinda's rape, Rosnah overreacts in sheer panic, perhaps wondering if she might one day become like Muslinda if she slowly starts to give up her religious and cultural identity. Stephen declares that he does not want to become a Muslim after their marriage – at the very most he will convert "for the sake of the marriage. But I won't believe in it and I won't practice it" (188). Rosnah, equating Muslinda's rape with a loss of religious and cultural values, refuses this compromise, declaring "No Muslim, no marriage" (188). Her refusal to compromise and to allow integration leaves her sad and empty. Towards the end of the play, Rosnah repudiates the pantun about throwing stones: "If I throw stones inside here, will it sink? Yah...of course it will sink... [*Slight laugh.*] What a stupid

pantun. How can stones not sink?" (189). She appears to have lost her faith in the ability of her culture and religion to carry her through. With the death of her grandmother, repository of cultural and religious conviction, Rosnah laments that "Now Rosnah cannot do anything... Rosnah got nothing"(189).

Unable to find a home in England or in Singapore, she seems to want to reject both:

> ROSNAH: I don't like this country... it's very dark, very cold. I don't like Singapore. So bright, so hot. I don't want East. I don't want West. I want to follow the river. It's very safe there. (190)

She rejects the English land and culture that are clearly not hers. But she also rejects the East, her heritage, because it has not provided her with answers. She recites a common Malay saying, translating it as follows: "It rains gold in other people's country. It rains stones in your own country. It's better to be in your own country" (180). But Rosnah does not feel that it is better to be at home. She seems to want to withdraw from both East and West, expressing her rejection of them in terms that hint chillingly at despair and suicide.

Siti Zubaidah tells Rosnah that she is within Rosnah, as is Nenek, and she tries to advise Rosnah about what she (Rosnah) is doing, for whom and why. But her advice seems unable to help – she was able to do what she did because there was still room for her to do "what my heart told me to do"; she fought for a particular thing she loved (190). That is not the case with Rosnah. She is unclear about whom to fight for ("who are my people?"), and also about why she should fight: "Why? Why? Because my duties... I have to...I must give...right? Contribute...No. I want to take. I must take only, like other people..." (191). In this speech, at one moment she sounds like she is spouting government-sponsored rhetoric ("duties", "give", "contribute"), the next she turns *kiasu* ("I must take only..."). Rosnah does not have the chance given to Siti Zubaidah, to make a decision based on personal desires and needs, in defiance of custom. Indeed, she doesn't even *know* what her desires or needs are. At the end, Rosnah is confused, hysterical, and near breakdown.

At the end of the play, the Actress orders everyone to get out, to leave the hysterical Rosnah alone. Having set up an intimate relationship with the audience throughout the rest of the play by interacting with them, she now seeks to shut them out. She loses herself in private thought, smiling

to herself, walking around the stage. Finally, she sits in the chair and waits for the audience to leave. Interestingly, these actions are *narrated* (by the Actress in the guise of Narrator), further distancing audience and actress/character. This serves to reinforce the idea of Rosnah's ultimate despairing isolation. Unable to relate to the demands of her society, or to other individuals within that society, Rosnah/the Actress retreats into herself. The nation Singapore has not given this Singaporean a clear sense of self and identity.

Notes

[1] This seems to contradict Kirpal Singh's assertion that the 1974 staging of Robert Yeo's *Are You There, Singapore?* denoted "the great flowering of Singapore English Theatre" (Singh 13). But his later statement that Sharma's and Tan's collaborations "have helped to refresh the Singaporean stage constructively" (Singh 14) does obliquely suggest that there was a period of withering after the great flowering.

[2] I am grateful to Leonard Jeyam for introducing me to this poem, through his seminar paper entitled "Private/Public Juxtapositions: Contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean Poetry after Edwin Thumboo and Wong Phui Nam", presented at the 12th Triennial Conference of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, Canberra, 9 – 14 July 2001.

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