Abstract
Full text of issue.
Dedication:
In memory of Lauris Edmond,
First of the ‘Unbecoming Daughters’
1924–2000

... and I
awake to another white night, that spare
other world where each leaf and stone
is not to be approached, scarcely named,
so rare, so unearthly has it become.
(Lauris Edmond,
‘Summer Near the Arctic Circle’)

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Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the new MLA (Modern Languages Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

Kunapipi is an internationally refereed journal of postcolonial literature formally acknowledged by the Australian National Library. Work published in Kunapipi is cited in The Journal of Commonwealth Literature’s Annual Bibliography (UK), The Year’s Work in English Studies (UK), The American Journal of African Literature (USA), The Grahamstown Information Journal (SA), Australian Literary Studies, The Indian Association for Commonwealth Studies, (India), The New Straits Times (Indonesia), and The Australian Public Affairs Information Service (produced by the National Library of Australia).

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*European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*

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Charlene Rajendran for ‘So Mush of Me’ from *Mangosteen Crumble* (Team East 1999)

Front cover: ‘78 Jalan Kampong Pantain, Melaka’, Victor Chin, 1999

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
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EDITIORIAL

Enacting a reversal of emigration from the colonies in search of the lost ‘home’, a journey made strangely familiar to many through the writing of Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Jean Rhys, Kunapipi has returned ‘home’ to Australia after a coming of age in Europe. With this, the first Australian issue of Kunapipi, we take the opportunity to look back to those twenty-one years in Denmark and England and to thank the many who dedicated their skills, time and energy to the production and support of the journal; but we also, in our thanks to the organisers of the recent ACLALS conference in Kuala Lumpur (‘Sharing a Commonwealth’, December 1998) from which much of the material for this issue has been drawn, look forward to a new life ‘down under’ ...

But if we are not standing on our heads and neither are you, then who is? Is this what it means to ‘share a commonwealth’ — a sharing of the need to recognise and acknowledge our angles of vision that we might constantly and vigilantly realign and ‘correct’ our sometimes skewed vision of ourselves and each other? Northern and southern hemispheres come together at the seam — the seam of our imagining.*

Anne Collett and Anna Rutherford

* This is also something of an obscure reference to a cricket ball and the next special issue of 2001, ‘A Postcolonial Angle on Sport’, for which contributions of creative and critical writing are invited.
ANNA RUTHERFORD

Lloyd Fernando: A Tribute

I feel very privileged to have been asked to introduce to you all today Professor Lloyd Fernando. Our friendship goes back a long time, just over thirty years to be exact, when many of the young people in the audience were not even born.

Our original meeting took place at the very first conference of ACLALS which was held at the University of Queensland in 1968. The Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies had been formed several years before by Professor A.N. Jeffares. I should add here that I have always had problems with the word Commonwealth — Common Wealth? But here is neither the time nor the place for a discussion of the word. It was a very rich and exciting meeting where we were able to meet writers and scholars from all around the former Empire — yes, we could all recite Wordsworth! None of us at that conference would have gone away not enriched. There was a great sense of a common bond, books and ideas were shared and friendships made that would last for many years. At the end of the week we packed our bags and took ourselves off to the four corners of the world hoping to meet again in three years time at the next international conference which was to be held at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica.

In 1989 ACLALS held its Silver Jubilee conference at the University of Kent in Canterbury. It was a mammoth conference, magnificently organised by Lyn Innes who I am sure still shudders at the thought of it. We decided that this was the appropriate occasion to honour Derry Jeffares and we did so by presenting him with a festschrift. It was not really hard to think of a title — A Shaping of Connections — for that is what that first meeting in Brisbane led to. In the book you will not only find creative material and essays but a collection of photographs taken over the years of delegates at the numerous conferences that have been held around the world. And if you look you will see that the very first photo is of a very young and very handsome Lloyd Fernando feeding a kangaroo at the first conference in Brisbane in 1968.

As I said previously friendships were made at that Brisbane conference that still remain to the present day. One of the lasting friendships I made in Brisbane was with Lloyd Fernando. Our paths have crossed on numerous occasions and Lloyd has always remained for me that very handsome young and generous writer and scholar. I have taught his books to my Danish students. My favourite has always been Scorpion Orchid. It is a book which I believe reveals his insight not only into the time in which he wrote it but also into the colonial past and the present day.
I would like to conclude with some lines of verse from an early Australian poet, Mary Gilmore. The poem is called ‘Old Botany Bay’ and is a tribute to Australia’s first white settlers, the convicts, who were shipped by colonial powers, across a world, to steal a continent. I am not reciting the complete poem, simply some lines which I feel appropriate.

I’m old  
Botany Bay  
Stiff in the joints,  
Little to say.

I am he  
Who paved the way,  
That you might walk  
At your ease today;

I was the conscript  
Sent to hell  
To make in the desert  
The living well;

I bore the heat,  
I blazed the track —  
Furrowed and bloody  
Upon my back.

I split the rock;  
I felled the tree:  
The nation was —  
Because of me!

It seems to me that Lloyd Fernando is one such pioneer and that we should all join in honouring him for his pioneer work so that such an event as today is possible. Thank you Lloyd.
Syd Harrex

NOVELIST WITH WHEELS

for Lloyd Fernando

Though you are for now in a wheel-chair
for meetings in public, because it's your
sari-soft hand I'm holding
I don't feel I'm bending, kneeling,
'God forbid' I hear your thought say
in the silence of a smile. The words
we always were to each other
have resisted impairment and decay.
It's horses for courses as usual,
so galloping is not on for the present.
But resuming a golden gait is —
not, I mean Straight is the Gate,
a text you know better than me anyway.
Your patient ambition to climb a mountain
a few toe and finger metres high
will be applauded by companies
of butterflies spraying, by fireflies incandescent
in the Malacca day and the Malay night
enamoured of your inexhaustible
charm, your placing the wrong word
and the right word on the notice-board
for the public to see and judge and improve,
and for generations honey-hived by love.
What is meant by ‘sharing a commonwealth in Malaysia’ as pertains to literature? I shall address it from the point of view of the writer. And because I am a writer writing in English rather than Malay, which is the national language, my views will be coloured by that bias.

To me, writers share a commonwealth if they feel they belong to a community that ensures equal rights for all; provides them with nurture, support, even funding; accords them official recognition — in short, makes them feel wanted. In Malaysia, such a commonwealth does exist but for those who write in the national language. Only their works are considered ‘national literature’, as distinct from literatures in other languages, which are termed ‘sectional’ or ‘communal’ literatures. In practice, this means that ‘sectional’ or ‘communal’ literatures do not enjoy support, funding or recognition from official sources, despite the fact that they are no less Malaysian in substance and expression. They are not officially promoted; neither are they recognised for the intellectual and creative contributions that they make to the national culture and imagination.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the national literary agency, overseer of Malaysian literature, gives little significance to these ‘sectional’ literatures. There is not even an ongoing programme to translate them into Malay. The Dewan goes to other parts of the world in search of literary texts to translate, and has done so with the works of Patrick White, Sally Morgan, Yukio Mishima, just to name a few, but it has not looked closer to home to the works of English-language writers like Lee Kok Liang, Ee Tiang Hong, Salleh Ben Joned, K.S. Maniam, Wong Phui Nam, or Omar Mohd Noor. There has been an anthology of poetry originally written in English with parallel translations in Malay published by the Dewan ten years ago, but that seems to have been the first and last of such endeavours. Its Malay title, ‘Antologi Puisi Pelbagai Kaum’, does not even allude to the poems as being Malaysian; transliterated, it means ‘Anthology of Poetry by Various Races’.

In the giving out of literary awards, none of the national ones has been given out to the ‘sectional’ littérateurs. As for something more international like the S.E.A. Write Award, which is presented annually to writers of Southeast Asia, all the recipients from Malaysia since the inception of the Award in 1979 have been those writing in Malay. This is not surprising since nominations for the Malaysian candidate are made every year by the Dewan and the right-wing, chauvinistic literary organisation called Gapena. It has become something of a
joke that because of the nature of the selection, the established Malay writers simply have to wait their turn to get the Award. If they do not get it this year, they are sure to get it sometime. In neighbouring Singapore, the nomination is rotated among writers from the three major races regardless of the language they write in. Is that why Singapore has achieved developed nation status while Malaysia is struggling with its Vision 2020?

I do not mean to belittle the national language nor the writers who write in it. I believe in and support the use of Malay as the national language, and I respect writers as writers regardless of what language they write in. It is also to be expected that in a multi-racial society, the desire of the predominant race to safeguard its dominance can overwhelm other considerations.

Even so, it remains to be said that the continued practice of keeping the literary commonwealth restrictive rather than all-encompassing is one that writers surely cannot feel comfortable with — because it goes against norms that writers would uphold rather than reject. It divides rather than harmonises, stirs up feelings of envy, and fosters defensiveness on the part of the privileged and distrust on the part of the marginalised.

To understand why despite its divisiveness this practice continues to prevail, it is necessary to look at the larger social and political context. Since the founding of this nation forty-one years ago, divisiveness has been a condition operating at the centre of Malaysian life. The political system is still organised and conducted along ethnic lines. It is a system that lends itself to, indeed actively engenders, the politicisation of issues such as race, language, culture, and religion.

It is a system that keeps up barriers when barriers need to be removed. It retards the evolution of a truly Malaysian consciousness through constantly reminding the people that they are Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others. Or Bumiputra and Non-Bumiputra. Malaysian politicians attune their speeches according to the groups they are addressing. Hence, they will talk of Malaysian unity when they address a multi-racial audience, but switch to chauvinist speak when they face an audience of their own race.

Race consciousness is still at a level where almost every issue is seen, consciously or otherwise, from the perspective of race. What this means for the writer is that his ethnic origin is often considered above the ideas he expresses; and he can be suspected of professing an agendum even if he does not have one. The writer thus finds himself confronted with a formidable barrier of prejudice — a barrier that has often prevented him from exposing — with uncompromising honesty — the glaring contradictions that exist in Malaysian society, from criticising the political excesses that have been perpetrated over the last twenty years, and from denouncing the financial, and political scandals that have arisen in that same period.

The other big barrier that the writer comes up against is curtailment of free expression. Despite avowals by the authorities that Malaysia upholds democratic principles, there are some things that cannot be expressed publicly. Some of these are specified in the Constitution, but a lot is arbitrarily decided by the government of the day. If what is said or written is construed to be a threat
to national security, the person responsible can be charged under the Internal Security Act. This Act, which allows for detention without trial, was a severe measure introduced by the British colonial regime to combat Communism. Today, however, there is no longer the threat of Communism since the Communist Party of Malaya gave up its struggle nine years ago. But the Internal Security Act continues to be enforced.

To the best of my knowledge, no writer has yet been detained under the Act specifically for his writing. That is perhaps because we have become adept at practising self-censorship. We learn quickly what to exclude from our texts if we want our writings published. Playwrights try not to include anything that may jeopardise their chances of getting a staging permit for their plays. To qualify for this all-important permit, the play-script has to be submitted for vetting by the Special Branch of the police — who, of course, are experts on culture. Some years ago, an innocuous play about a man recounting the difficulties he underwent to bury his grandfather was denied a permit. Why this was so remains a mystery. Perhaps, unknown to us, burial is regarded as a subversive activity.

When Sinclair Lewis wrote that ‘Every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile’, he had to have been referring to Malaysia. Given the divided character of the society, Malaysian writers often feel that what we say is not going to reach out to a wide audience, much less influence them. In Malaysia, change usually comes about at the initiative of the ruling authority, not the individual, not even the grassroots. The voice of the writer is one of the last to be heard. And it would be unrealistic for him to count on massive public support for his views. Some years ago, one of our National Laureates went on an artist’s strike to protest against what he called an insensitive publishing bureaucracy. For his action, he earned more condemnation than sympathy from his peers while the rest of the public did not care.

When writers are as divided as the society, their effectiveness as individuals and as a collective is necessarily diminished. When we should be creating awareness among the people of the unjustness of some laws, we are instead cowed by these very laws. It seems to me, then, that for us to reclaim our roles as writers, as the commentators of our times, the initiators of new ideas, we will have to go against the national line, against the ideology of politicians who divide and rule. The positive effects of this cannot be denied by those who are sensible enough to recognise what is just and right.

Sharing a commonwealth brings with it the feeling that one can stand together with one’s peers and work towards enhancing our shared needs and beliefs. If Malaysian writers can come together as equals, we can work together towards eradicating the culture of fear. We can eliminate the distinctions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ that brand writers of different ethnic and linguistic affiliations. Instead of being suspicious and envious of each other, we can work towards affirming life and all that’s noble about it.

We can build a commonwealth that all Malaysian writers can share in. A commonwealth of equality, of freedom, of humanity.
Fell Sergeant

Kassim called Partha to say that Kevin had died. ‘An accident in the Belidau railway station. Part of the train was shunting very slowly,’ Kassim said. ‘Kevin on the platform thought it was leaving, ran after it and missed his footing jumping on.’

‘His withered arm didn’t help,’ Kassim said, ‘Can you imagine? I found Lillian on the platform screaming without ceasing, going from one bystander to another until I came back.’

Pressing the receiver to his ear Partha said, ‘Came back?’

‘I was seeing them off to Penang. Kevin and Lillian. I had gone to a stall to get a bottle of mineral water for Lillian. Only a few minutes. It happened then. When I came back, he was gone and she was screaming like a mad woman.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘He’s dead, man. Dead. That’s why I’m calling. You did some work for him once, didn’t you? Drew up some agreements or something? Partha?’

‘Yah, I’m here. Yes, a long time ago.’

Kassim said, ‘That whole day he kept saying, “I must get Partha. Where’s Partha? His old number isn’t working. Partha can do it for me.” He was planning another big condo project, you see, and he wanted you in on it. Where were you? Well he’s gone now, it doesn’t matter anymore, there’s nothing we can do. Okay, we’ll meet up some time.’

No, wait, he’s an old school chum. I haven’t seen him for twenty years, Partha thought. Or you, Kassim. We quarrelled about something didn’t we? Something someone said I said you said. You called me the real kafir. Not the others, you said, only me. I called you a Pharisee. Something like that. We didn’t talk to each other for some time after that.

In school, they would tug at Kevin’s limp left arm to annoy him. He would glare at them through his thick-rimmed spectacles that gave him an owlish look, but he hung around. When as twelve-year olds, they rode up and down hills over fifteen miles in scorching heat, he stuck with them, withered arm and all. In the end Kevin was the millionaire, chairman of several trading companies, and friend of Ministers.

Kassim was the chairman of a multinational corporation who, despite the changing times, kept his old friends though they didn’t meet often. Now with Kevin’s death those old times were briefly revived. Partha was still a journeyman lawyer who had never appeared higher than the Sessions Courts, except occasionally. Was this why he couldn’t weep?
The rest of the story as Kassim told it made him recoil as if from something obscene.

Lillian was shouting, ‘Please help him. Please do something.’ Her voice rasped, hoarse from shouting. ‘We already had plane tickets, what for to go by train, I said. But no, he suddenly remembered his boyhood love of trains and said we must do it. Now see what happened.’ She pointed.

A crowd was standing with folded arms looking at a mound on the railway platform, roughly covered with newspapers. ‘My stomach caved in,’ Kassim told Partha.

Kassim led her to the Station Master’s office and sat her down, waiting for the shudders to subside. Then he raced back to the platform. A ten-metre space was between the two halves of the truncated train. Someone was taking measurements. Where a shoe had fallen off. His thick-rimmed glasses.

A man thrust a handphone out. ‘You want to make a telephone call? Here, use mine. No problem.’

Kassim said to Partha, ‘I tried calling you again. No answer.’

That man said to Kassim, ‘I can look after everything for you. You have to make a Police Report. Get a lawyer. I know a good one. Guarantee within two years the wife can get the money. Permit — hah, permit also you need. This one uh, sure case one. They had no controls, nothing. Here, I give you my card. And this one, lawyer’s card. You want I deduct five percent. Twenty-five percent only.’

Kassim gave him back his phone.
The man said, ‘You have a lot to do, you know. Patch him up. Get the postmortem. See, blood still coming out of his body, still draining out. Brain splashed all over. I don’t think I even can move it. How to put him in a suit?’

Kassim turned away. The man called out, ‘I can help you with everything. A casket. For cremation not expensive. Five thousand only.’

Kassim went back to Lillian. He said, ‘I’m so sorry.’
She said, ‘Why don’t you go and help him.’
‘Lillian, you’ve got to pull yourself together. He’s dead.’
‘Now what, now what.’ She broke down again.

The ambulance arrived late. To the Station Master’s reproof, the driver said, ‘Ya la, traffic jam, that’s why.’

The strings of small lighted bulbs draped in the branches of the trees lining the road illuminated the centre of the dark town like a deserted fairground as they drove to the hospital, following the ambulance. Lillian was weeping again, quietly this time.

In the casualty ward two more touts came up. To the first who put a card in Kassim’s hand, he said, ‘Come on, man, not now.’ To the second, a small Indian with a trimmed beard and an ingratiating smile, he said, ‘Get out,’ and then called him back. These things had to be done, if not by one, then another.

At the Police Station at two-thirty in the morning, the Corporal’s routine questions grated on Lillian. She said, balefully, ‘What for you all want to know so much. No point ya. What’s the matter with you all uh? I simply want to take him back, that’s all. Can you give me the permit?’
Kassim stepped up to the counter and spoke to the Corporal whose face was a wooden mask.

The Corporal said, ‘Ta’ada repot mana boleh kasi permit?’

Kassim said, ‘Ya la, saya faham.’ He led Lillian to a low wooden bench along a wall of the reception area of the Station. The lines of dried sweat on her face and the twisted strands of her hair made her look witch-like in the shadow.

The Corporal told Kassim to go into the Sergeant’s room. When Kassim came back he sat beside Lillian on the bench and took a deep breath. He said, ‘They’re saying if you want, the Inspector will look after everything for you. They have their people, you don’t have to worry. They will do everything. They can do things fast.’

‘Oh my god, even these people — and they — these — even they —’
‘Not so loud. They only want to help, they say.’
She shouted, ‘What is this?’
Kassim said, ‘I don’t know what to say. You must decide.’

‘What about him?’ She turned unseeing towards the small figure of the Indian man with the trimmed beard who smiled eagerly and came forward nodding his head. ‘Did you agree with him?’

‘I don’t know. Yes, I think so.’
‘And that fixed us,’ Kassim told Partha. They didn’t get the papers until 2pm the next day.

Partha said, ‘Bloody shits.’
Kassim said, ‘I’ll catch up with you some time,’ and rang off.

So that was the end, it could not be the end, Partha thought. First it was Raymond, down with a stroke. Then it was Hairil, chain-smoker. Cancer. After that Heng Sim. Killed himself. After that, yesterday, now, Kevin. Kevin’s time, their times, were slowly dying. Who was left from those old school days twenty-five years ago? Kassim and him. All memories would gradually fade off until there was nothing left. Would they persist a little longer if he saw where Kevin faded off?

Several nights later he stood near the same night train before it left for Penang. The crowd on the platform was simply a bunch of people on film with the sound turned off. He looked only at the train, gleaming silver grey, its curving sides giving it a snub-nosed, obscene look. The step at the entrance to each coach was level with the platform, and you could step smartly across. But there was a catch. Step and platform were not flush. There was a gap of about one foot between the two. If you were in your sixties and had one withered arm and you missed your footing and your leg went through, what would happen? The train had only to move at snail’s pace during shunting. You would crash to the platform as the train took you gently with it crying out, ‘Help me, help me.’ In the thirty seconds or more that it would take for the signalmen to realize something was amiss and stop the engine, your leg would have been crushed as if you had been slowly fed into a meat-grinder. You would inexorably reach the end of the carriage, and you would now fall askew on the rails, ready for the solid, three-ton iron wheels of the next carriage to do what solid three-ton iron
wheels do. You would end in the dark, gristle stuck on the wheels, legs severed, jaw crushed, your skull a smashed egg when the wheels stopped.

Partha continued to sit on the bench long after the train had departed and the platform was empty. He drove back, trembling. He got Lillian’s number in Penang from Kassim and called her. Although it was a month later, he had to speak to her.

The loud sound of rock music hit his ear as the receiver was picked up and a woman’s voice shouted, ‘Ay, put down the volume, people want to telephone. Hallo, yes?’

He said, ‘You don’t know me. I’m Parthasarathy, a friend of Kevin’s.’

‘Who?’

‘Partha.’

‘Oh yes. Partha. I’ve heard about you. Just a minute. I’ll turn down the music some more. We have a party going on. Yes?’

‘I heard too late of Kevin’s death. I just wanted to offer my sympathies. I didn’t know until — ’

‘Thank you.’

‘If there’s anything I can do — ’

‘It’s all right. Thank you.’

He didn’t know what else to say. ‘Kassim mentioned that Kevin wanted me to do some work for him. If I can help — ’

‘Oh, the Taman Beng Lim project. We’ve already got lawyers. You know, so many lawyers asking to do the work. But we have already chosen. Sorry uh. Maybe next time we can give you something.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘I know. It’s all right. We’re okay now. My son Paul is the new manager. He’s doing fine, everything is fine.’

He had expected, unfairly, he knew, a grieving widow.

Partha saw again Kevin on the track in pieces and the grief he sought finally overwhelmed him, strange tears mixing with stranger laughter. He felt desperate that the only real memory he had of Kevin was of the schoolboy bicycle ride with him, withered arm and all, up and down the hills so long ago over fifteen miles in scorching heat. That was all Partha could salvage from the past. The images of that piece of time had become fainter as each one passed away, Raymond, Hairil, Heng Sim, flickering more weakly with each death.

With Kevin’s death the only persons who knew of the existence of those times were himself and Kassim. When we, too, go, Partha thought, no one will ever know of the existence of those times. That piece of time would also be dead. It will be as if those times never existed. As if Kevin had never existed. That piece of time would never have existed. Finally there would truly be only nothingness left. He knew now there wouldn’t be a death second time round.

In a panic he called Kassim. ‘Ay, Kassim. Remember that quarrel we had so many years ago? I don’t know. Some stupid thing. You can’t remember? Never mind. Want to go out for a drink?’
BERNARD WILSON

‘Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?’: The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid*

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.

(Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism*)

I have but sparse, thin words,
threadbare against the touch of ice
and wind, words bereft
of power as charm against
prospect of your travail,
and of your dangerous passage over black gulfs.

(Wong Phui Nam ‘Terminal Ward’)

Lloyd Fernando is one of three prose writers (the other two being Lee Kok Liang and K.S. Maniam) who should rightfully be considered at the forefront of Malaysian literature written in English. Despite stylistic differences, each of these authors, through their examination of postcolonialism, marginalisation, and the painful quest for cultural and racial unification, has asked significant questions concerning hybrid or ethnocentric identity. All three provide local settings pregnant with oppositions, all three employ shifting natural landscapes in their writing as backgrounds to the issues of multiple identity that have emerged from Malaysia’s colonial past and multiracial present. Central to their beliefs, to borrow from Homi Bhabha, is that nation may only be achieved through dissemination and re-birth, and that acknowledgment of difference must lead first to acceptance — and then embracement — of racial and cultural ‘otherness’.

Fernando’s brooding, violent landscapes and structural juxtapositions mirror the paradox inherent in his subject matter: one must jettison identity in order to create identity. He examines, in his own words, the effects of ‘detribalization anxiety’ and the consequent threat for individuals who seek a broader multicultural perspective of an existence in flux:
A person becomes aware, at some point, that the effort of cultural growth and development and the dedication to a widening sensibility have no foreseeable natural conclusion but are part of an unceasing process, capable of continuing as if in infinite series, with every stage of the series having no lasting validity.\(^2\)

Such a problematic position has, as Fernando is quick to point out, many interstices with the literature of Conrad (and to a lesser extent Forster), but while Conrad examines the effects of encountering alterity from the dominant and external Eurocentric viewpoint, Fernando analyses this phenomenon very much from within his own geographical, and psychological, terrain. Thus, those races and cultures that people the margins of the Conradian text are given voices and repositioned at the centre — rather than the periphery — of the text. Fernando’s thrust, however, is not towards the relationship between colonial and postcolonial and the redressing of that balance but, rather, he seeks to address the lingering sense of Diaspora that exists for many Malaysians.

As such, *Scorpion Orchid*,\(^3\) Fernando’s first novel (published in 1976), is as relevant to the political machinations and ethnic divisions that exist in contemporary Malaysia as it was when it was first released. Though Singapore — where the principal action of *Scorpion Orchid* is set — may be seen to have made considerable progress in addressing such divisions and differences (albeit through at times draconian restrictions regarding freedom of speech and legitimate political opposition), Fernando’s novel still provides a pertinent message regarding the path to racial integration and national identity to both countries.

On the surface, the novel relates the story of four individuals representing the four principal racial groups of Singapore during the racial riots and political upheaval of the 1950s. Sabran (Malay), Guan Kheng (Chinese), Santinathan (Indian) and Peter (Eurasian) are idealistic university students whose naive faith in a shared future is exploded against a backdrop of violence and recriminations. At a more complex level, the novel is a cacophony of disparate voices echoing the concerns and confusion of Singapore in the 1950s and, to a certain extent, the continuing complexities arising from racial integration in contemporary Malaysia. But Fernando does not limit those voices to the four central characters. Rather, *Scorpion Orchid* is an experimental canvas in which the author forces the reader to constantly shift focus through the use of historical and pseudo-historical textual interpolations, European expatriate interpretations of the riots, and dire warnings from the nebulous and enigmatic symbol of Tok Said, seen by Abdul Majid b. N. Baksh as ‘the embodiment of the Malaysian consciousness, a psychological entity akin to the Spiritus Mundi of Yeats’.\(^4\)

Central to the four young men’s sense of unity is the flawed perception of a common enemy — in this case British colonialism — but at the heart of the matter is the fact that the enemy exists within their own increasingly fraught relationships and what each has come to represent to the others. It is only the waitress Sally who, as martyred prostitute, evoking the image of a fusion of Christ and Mary Magdalene, comes close to understanding the paradoxical and protean nature of unity:
They are frightened, all of them, as if they are running away from something and want to rest. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, I give them rest, I know they are confused, they talk bad of one another sometimes — sometimes even they get angry. But when they are with me they become calm, they don’t argue, they don’t talk. Why shouldn’t this be called love too? (p. 120)

Sally is both nature and nurture, a personification of the all-embracing qualities of Malaysia, and it is her understanding of the tenuous bonds that hold these cultures together, and her function as a receptacle for the boys’ racial (and sexual) insecurities, that necessitates her chameleon-like depiction in the story. On several occasions, she is portrayed as either distinctly Chinese or Malay and often as both, a blurring of racial boundaries that both fascinates and terrifies Ghuan Keng, who begins to seek ‘the stabilising sense of his own past’ (p. 79):

They spoke Cantonese in public, Malay in bed. Her Malay was better than her Cantonese, its fluency frightened him. He knew no other Chinese who spoke it so well. It made him feel left on a shoal amidst a swift-flowing river. (p. 79)

But Sally’s propensity to transcend race (and language) is also the cause of her spiritual and physical destruction by those not yet ready to accept fluid identity. The harsh reality of the world in the streets — a reality understood only too well by Sally — is juxtaposed against the isolated and ideological world of the university. Her marginalisation (and brutalisation) is linked to her gender and profession, but most particularly to an indistinctness of physical and linguistic racial determinates in a time when homogeneity is crucial to a sense of belonging and protection. That the blame for this lies with all of the racial groups in Malaysia is clear; despite Sally’s close physical and spiritual bonds with the four male protagonists, she is abandoned and betrayed. In describing her rape as ‘multiracial’ (p. 123) the author conveys a clear message. The colonial period no longer exists. In this fragile, new society no one group may claim victimisation; all are responsible for creating a purposeful shared future.

Santinathan, Sabran, Ghuan Kheng and Peter also experience this sense of betrayal in varying degrees, yet for each it represents the betrayal of a collective idealistic past, of a ‘blunt comradeship’ that has dissipated in the face of a harsh, uncertain future. Only Peter suffers actual physical harm and, of the central male characters, his physical features dictate that he will perceive himself as the most marginalised. His face and languages are signifiers of both the colonised and the coloniser, and it is particularly the power of language to redefine identity that Peter is most aware of:

I was born in Malacca speaking Portuguese. That’s because the Portuguese colonised us so many hundred years ago. The Dutch didn’t stay long enough, or I suppose it’s a toss up I would be speaking Dutch instead now. Anyway the result was no one outside understood the Portuguese I spoke. Then because the British had ousted the Dutch, I learnt English and forgot my Portuguese. It was like taking out the parts and organs of my body and replacing them with others. Then the Japs came and we were told to forget English, learn Japanese. So once more I began taking out parts and putting in new ones — unlearning my language and learning another. Now it seems I must unlearn it once more and learn Malay. (pp. 142–43)
Peter’s argument is a self-explanatory one: the process of colonisation is never complete and is never-ending. The individual is only truly colonised (and for colonised one may also read achieving a concrete sense of self) when he or she believes that he or she belongs. The negative connotations of such a thesis are clear; identity for those who are marginalised, in these terms, is to seek total colonisation rather than be confronted by a multiplicity of identities.

‘Do you wish to join our society or not?’ is both the specific and covert refrain of the novel, but Fernando cannot provide any comfortable answer. Rather, as Zalina Mohd Lazim and Koh Tai Ann have pointed out, he redresses Eurocentric notions of history to provide a multi-layered Malaysian sense of one’s past. Ultimately, Peter announces his return to Singapore, having gained insight from his two years in England — yet his statements (‘I love Malaya. I love Singapore. I didn’t realise how much until I came here’) somehow ring hollow. The very structure of Fernando’s novel, offering multifarious dialogues and seemingly incompatible versions of the same historical events from opposing views, suggests that Peter’s new-found belief in his origins and renewed optimism are necessarily flawed — yet unquestionably vital to the creation of nationhood. Though Shirley Lim sees these fragments moving ‘in an ever increasing arc of optimism to Peter’s final statement of his “return passage”’ and, indeed, his letter provides perspective and some resolution to the plight of the colonised, his sentiments are less convincing when taken in conjunction with the overall structure of the novel, positioned as they are in the ironic gaps between historical point and counterpoint. It is clear that language for Peter, whether in Singapore or England, bears the burden of association with imperialism. It is also paradoxically clear that though a mutual language is a superficial solution, verbal communication is nevertheless crucial to eliminating the racial polarisation that can exist in such a society. To go some way towards avoiding binary divisions, that communication must be, in Bakhtinian terms, heteroglossic rather than superficially monoglossic — a theme which Fernando further explores in his second novel, *Green is the Colour*, and one which is clarified by Bakhtin’s explanation:

> Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each of which in its own way reflects a little piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp behind their inter-reflecting aspects for a world that is broader, more multi-levelled and multi-horizoned than would be available to one language, one mirror.

It follows then, that Peter’s sense of colonial burden, and the implications that this carries, are of less concern to the author than the possibility of multiple dialogues between cultures within Malaysia and the unifying potential for nationhood that such a situation offers. Indeed, Fernando has increasingly seen the binary divisions between colonial and postcolonial enforced by some literary theorists as outdated and anachronistic. In a paper entitled ‘Postcolonialism: Caught in a Time Warp?’ delivered at a conference organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1994, he attacks those ‘critics of formidable skill’ who seek to place writers of new literature ‘back into colonial captivity’. Fernando eloquently argues that to be delineated as either ‘colonial’ or ‘postcolonial’ is to
be caught in the classic false dilemma — and further, that the so-called postcolonial subject has far less chance of escape than the colonial subject. Divisions, in Fernando’s terms, no longer exist between coloniser and colonised. Such a view is anachronistic and, in terms of the analysis of new literatures, irresponsible:

The colonial period is over; the use of the colonial theme as the distinguishing criterion for literatures in English is a non-starter.¹⁰

To avoid this false binary dialectic one must, he claims, acknowledge that there is no longer a centre — at least in literary terms — or at the very least, that this centre is fluid. To acknowledge that one inhabits the periphery is to admit defeat, for in doing so one posits oneself firmly in the position of ‘lesser’. And it is this spatial dilemma that each of the four young men must confront.

The response of each of the central characters — with the notable exception of Sally, who has already achieved insight through suffering, yet is still able to love — is to retreat, in varying degrees, into what he perceives as his racial and cultural heritage. Such a solution, the action of the novel makes clear, can only provide temporary solace. But though the colonial theme no longer holds credence in Fernando’s terms, it is nevertheless crucial that the racial and cultural issues confronting Malaysians are addressed. The reactions of the central characters to the ethnic violence they encounter is to attribute characteristics and nature according to race and to hide in the comforting cocoon of what they perceive to be their own racial identity. In doing so, the former binary division between coloniser and colonised is replaced by a racial sense of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Though Sabran initially sees his relationship with Santinathan as ‘being attuned, words were no longer necessary’ (p. 59), when confronted with the harsh realities and divisions of the riots, their bonds are shown to be fragile:

They confronted each other, a momentary island in a seething crowd, trying to find the words which would keep their friendship intact. At last Sabran turned away saying curtly, ‘Peter was right. You’re a foreigner too.’ (p. 73)

The individuals who represent the four racial groups in Scorpion Orchid may seek temporary comfort through identification with their ancestry but this myopic attempt at resolution will prove transitory. Rather, they must forge bonds through more permanent links: specifically, a sense of shared humanity and, in particular, a physical connection with the land. But are such links sufficient to provide unity and a sense of common purpose? Peter’s proposed return and renewed faith in his country offer some optimism, but it is an optimism that has been undercut in the text by the betrayal of Sally, the shadowy Tok Said’s apocalyptic prophecies and the disintegration and displacement of the principal characters. Ultimately, Fernando shows, there is no pat solution. If the multicultural ideal is to shed the entrapment of homogeneity by embracing plurality, one is confronted by the possibility that faces Conrad’s Marlowe:
Heterogeneity in its ultimate form threatens a kind of valuelessness which accompanies indiscriminate change, where homogeneity at the other end of the scale is a prison.\(^\text{11}\)

Significantly, Fernando offers little in the way of concrete reassurance. He does, however, offer encouragement. Reiterating the warning implicit in the title of his novel, Fernando borrows from the Pelayaran Abdullah to convey a final message of guarded hope:

All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles. (p. 157)

One senses that this will not be the final stage of the journey. Peter, like the cultures and races that make up what he now sees as his nation, must learn that identity is a fluid concept. To remain still is to stagnate.

NOTES

2. ibid., p. 24.
3. Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid* (Singapore: Times, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
10. ibid., p. 55.
The reservoir is a cliché of calm
despite its Cantonese name. Masters
and indentured agreed these were trees
‘Lam’ and mountains. One saw
England, mists and winds rolling down
the Peak another Lake District,
except off the coast of China. The other
saw China, classically brushed
in bamboo lines; and the greater China
behind it, reaching beyond the tears
of the Yellow River all the way to Beijing.
‘Lam’ Cantonese for ‘Lim’: ideogram
of trees upright with thick thrusting branches.
Leaves fall close to their roots. Cliches
surface from speechless calm,
returning me unspeaking to
where I had not known I’d left.

BETRAYING

Betraying no one but my self,
Music sings loud and louder,
Filling the hours between speaking
And sleep. Among the young
This morning I treaded water,
Floating on airs; but tonight,
An old woman, am led by music
Whose voice suffuses then falls,
A tempo that slips away,
Like you, memory, measured
And immeasurable, betraying
No one but myself.
In another life
I would have fallen in love with you

We would have been ship-wrecked.
that’s true, washed ashore
clinging to each other
inside a cradle of kelp.

In another life
I would have staggered from the surf
your sodden hair
transfiguring my face.
that’s true.

But the desert bit of the island
is not. Yet there we are,
lying on our backs
(the sand is hot)
breathing out the sea.
breathing in the mango air

until at last we arose
and gave our shadows back
their former lives

and stepped into the fringes
of the jungle to reinvent
the future

to map and name our island
tongue to tongue.
a first birth place.

“What is that scarlet bird?”
you asked.

In another life
I would have answered your question,
and fallen
in island love
with you.
JACQUELINE LO

Competing Subjectivities in
*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*

The Singaporean playwright, Kuo Pao Kun, was one of the many political activists detained under the Internal Security Act during one of the government’s massive communist purges in 1976. He was detained for four and a half years. In light of his continuing participation in Singaporean theatre, Kuo has, understandably, been careful to refer to this period as a ‘very deep education process’. Kuo describes the experience in terms of artistic and philosophical shifts rather than drawing attention to the political impact of imprisonment. My aim in this essay is to argue that imprisonment had a more profound effect on Kuo than he has been prepared to discuss publicly, that is, that imprisonment heightened his awareness of the strategies of regulation and surveillance that have been naturalised in mainstream Singaporean society. My main thesis is that this awareness has led to a radical shift in Kuo’s understanding of the function of power — not as an externally imposed force but something which is manufactured willingly through technologies of subjectification.

Kuo’s play, *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1990), is a monologue performed by an unnamed narrator who will be referred to here as the grandson. As head of the family, the grandson is responsible for the funeral rites of his grandfather. At the cemetery with hundreds of people in attendance, he finds that his grandfather’s traditional and very grand coffin is too big for the burial hole allocated. The undertaker refuses to extend the standard size plot because it is contrary to state regulation. The grandson drags the manager to ‘the department’ to confront ‘the officer-in-charge’ who spouts the same principle of ‘no exception to the rule’. The grandson manages to hold his ground and even threatens to have his family spend the night in protest at the cemetery. He is surprised by his own defiance in challenging the authorities. The ruse pays off and he manages to secure a larger plot under the strict proviso that such exceptions will not be tolerated again. The monologue finishes with the grandson resigned to the fact that he will never have a coffin like his grandfather’s. His fate is to be pragmatic and to conform to regulation.

The play is usually interpreted as advocating individualism against a bureaucracy that insists upon rigid conformity and compliance. The individual is seen to be struggling against the disciplinary methods of the centre and, in the course of testing its limits, is empowered by the struggle. As Krishen Jit in his
introduction to the play notes, the grandson is initially quite blasé about the uniqueness of his grandfather’s coffin ‘[but] as he confronts obstacles to the burial put up by red-tape and a mechanistic bureaucracy, he learns to respect tradition, and his newly-gained attitude leads him to a poignant recognition of his humanity’ (p. 21).

Such a reading tends to obscure the more complex and political dimensions of the text. The pitching of the individual against a monolithic system results, in this instance, in the uninterrogated elevation of the liberal humanist subject. The individual is understood in the conventional sense of liberalism which posits the Self as the source of change and action. It assumes a polemic which sets the Self against an Other and/or ‘the system’, and promotes the idea that individuals who reach a certain level of consciousness will somehow know the ‘truth’ and will therefore be able to act upon it.

According to this reading, the grandson’s struggle to procure an alternative final resting place for his grandfather is an allegorical struggle which enables him to resist the subject positions designated for him by the political system. The grandfather’s ‘abnormal’ grave represents the grandson’s ability to negotiate and occupy an oppositional status. While this room to manoeuvre is certainly the most politicised aspect of the play, such a reading can also be limiting. Subversions of this kind are merely transitory — they cannot address structural operations of power within the system. As the officer in the play makes clear, such anomalies will only be tolerated once. Although a liberal humanist reading such as this celebrates the triumph of resistance, ultimately, the subversion consolidates the hegemony of the dominant order and the position of the grateful subject within it.

Jit’s introduction suggests that Kuo’s detention period was instrumental in his changing perception of tradition and culture. In particular, Jit contends The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole represents Kuo’s changing ‘personal and psychological stance ... towards Chinese tradition’. The play is described as the ‘journey of the narrator from indifference to respect [for] his roots’ (p. 21). This focus on the rediscovery of tradition clearly takes its cue from a larger postcolonial discourse which the government has appropriated for its nation-building agenda. Seen in this light, the ‘innocent’ reading of the play as a journey of rediscovering tradition foregrounds not only the significance of this trope in the general process of decolonisation, but also, and more importantly, the specific ways in which the producers of culture (playwrights and critics alike) unconsciously reproduce and consolidate the political status quo by subscribing to this myth of authenticity.

Close analysis of the play reveals that it does not engage with the notion of tradition in any critical or in-depth manner. Rather, the immutability of tradition is presented as a foregone conclusion — it appears to exist in an hermetically sealed space — forgotten perhaps in rapidly modernising Singapore but still alive and readily accessible to the individual through a process of soul-searching. The play does not question the political construction nor the implication of tradition and the past. It does not even ask whose nor which version of tradition is presented as a solution. In view of the fact that
government-inspired discussions of the function of tradition and ‘Asian values’ were increasingly in the limelight in the early ’80s, it is disturbing that the play appears to echo these concerns unproblematically.

*The Coffin*’s uncritical representation of tradition is both a reaction as well as a response to the government’s push for the recuperation of ‘Asian values’, but it also bears the tension of a growing concern with the construction of the subject within a repressive political culture. Rather than viewing tradition as an end in itself, I want to supplement earlier readings of the play with the argument that it is the tension and contradiction between competing discourses of Confucianism and the ideology of pragmatism which problematises the notion of subject-formation that makes the play so compelling and implicitly political.

In the ’80s, the Singaporean government took a culturalist approach to redress some of the more negative aspects of its push towards modernisation and capitalist development. The ideology of pragmatism that characterised governance in the ’70s nurtured the idea of ‘rugged individualism’ which encouraged competition and meritocracy. Individual initiative and self-determination were couched within the larger nation-building agenda with the government functioning as the final arbiter of economic rationalism. This position legitimised some of the more paternalistic tactics used by the government to regulate society (on matters such as free speech, population control and land management, for instance). By the ’80s, the link between the official promotion of rugged individualism and the general sense of alienation and dissatisfaction among the young in particular, was attributed to the influence of Western culture rather than a consideration of the structural effect of existing government policies. A distinction was made between the rugged individualism promoted in the ’70s under the broad banner of national economic growth and the ‘excessive individualism’ of the ’80s which centred on individual rather than collective needs.

It is interesting to note that Singaporeans were encouraged to view this threat as a ‘virus’ deriving from external sources rather than arising from within individual subjects. Desirable cultural qualities were presented as something that already existed within local bodies, as the naturalised receptacles of ‘Asian’ culture, whilst the threat of impurity was perceived as emanating from without. The notion of an already hybridised Singaporean subjectivity which included both Eastern and Western influences, and which has been historically synthesised to address local specificities, was never given sufficient attention by the authorities. The notion of an Asian culture in need of preservation from the corruption of Western influences was widely promoted through government agencies such as the media. George Yeo articulated a sentiment shared by many others within the political elite when he identified the decline of Western society as the result of individualism.

Since the 1960s, many western societies have gone downhill. Budget deficits have become uncontrollable. The rule of law has been taken to extremes so that to protect one innocent man, the system is prepared to let 99 guilty men go free. As a result, crime is rampant. By raising the individual far above society, western culture has lost its moral tone. There is a lack of leadership because political leaders are viewed with
low esteem.... All this has strengthened our conviction that we must find our own solution to our problems and cannot accept western models as ultimate or ideal.

The speech is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it identifies the issue of political and economic management in terms of culture thereby appealing to the prevailing postcolonial awareness of the readers, many of whom feel strongly about Western cultural imperialism. Secondly, despite the argument being couched in terms of cultural difference, the focus remains on economic rationalism. The budgets of the said Western economies are uncontrollable and there is social unrest because of cultural decay. The converse should hold that if cultural values were intact, the economy and social harmony would be reinstated. This simplistic culturalist approach to fundamental political and economic issues which ignores the role of international market forces provides a populist rationale for legitimising the push for the promotion of 'Asian values'. The linking of economic advantages with cultural values is a deliberate one, calculated to strike at the core of a population which has been encouraged to believe in the fragility of the city-state. Hence the ideology of pragmatism based on economic rationalism and the push towards Asian, and specifically Confucian, values are presented as compatible nation-building discourses. Both serve to maintain and consolidate the existing image of a successful nation under the benevolent guidance of its present leaders.

This politically motivated invention of tradition to contain political unrest is clearly capitalising on the discourse of postcolonialism. Although the intention of the introduction of Confucianism into the socio-cultural arena was the amelioration of individualistic tendencies associated with Western capitalism, it may have instead resulted in the potential for conflict, uncertainty and confusion as Singaporeans negotiated between two sets of apparently compatible values which were supposed to promote further nation-building as well as personal development. This confusion of allegiances and subject positions is clearly demonstrated in *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole*.

The grandson in the play is caught between filial piety and his obligation to the state. This is made clear in the play when the grandson is at his wit's end battling with the manager at the cemetery:

> And I began to sweat.... But somehow, at this my moment of crisis, the sight of grandfather's big coffin became a source of strength and inspiration. As I looked at it, I felt as if the coffin was speaking to me, persuading me not to give up. Not to give up this big, grand old thing. (p. 38)

But the pull of tradition comes up against the disciplinary presence of the officer-in-charge at the department. The officer refuses to grant a double plot on the basis of state regulated economic pragmatism.

> No. no. no! That will be running against our national planning. You are well aware of the fact that we are a densely populated nation with very limited land resources. The consideration for humanity and sympathy cannot over-step the constraint of the state policy! (p. 42)
Here, in a nutshell, is the basic conflict of the play. The play sets up a state-endorsed notion of filial piety against its mirror image in Confucianist thought — the authority of the state. The grandson’s dilemma appears unresolvable. His initial resignation to the logic and immutability of the ideology of pragmatism is indicative of his position as subject of the dominant order:

Well, I can’t say anything against that. ‘But what about my grandfather?’ I thought to myself. ‘Constraint or not, the old man’s big coffin still has to have a hole big enough to go into, hasn’t he?’ (p. 42)

The text foregrounds the incompatibility of two sets of values which are normally promoted as complementary discourses in the interest of both collective and individual welfare. The family is the primary unit of political and moral organisation in Confucianist thought. The grandson is obviously an active participant of the traditional patrilineal structure. At the start of the play, he refers to the break up of the extended family structure and explains that his immediate family is the only remaining one in the ancestral home. The death of the grandfather has placed him as the head of the family. This role dictates that he is obligated to fulfil the last wishes of his grandfather and respect the rituals and tradition for which he is now a figurehead. His compulsion to bury his grandfather according to the latter’s wishes is not, however, solely motivated by filial piety. In contrast to earlier readings of the play, I want to argue that rather than reaching an understanding of his own mortality or humanity, the grandson is greatly troubled by his status in the family structure. Whilst he manages, at the end, to procure a special grave for his grandfather, the grandson will have to accept an alternative fate:

So, under the circumstances, to be pragmatic, it seems that I have to get a standard size one. But then, whenever I get to the cemetery and see those graves — those rows after rows of standard size graves, I cannot resist thinking about the other problem, and this is what really bothers me a lot: ‘Now with all of them in the same size and the same shape, would my sons and daughters, and my grandsons and granddaughters after them, be able to find me out and recognise me?’ I don’t know ... I just don’t know.... (p. 46)

The play ends on this poignant note; it is this preoccupation which appears to be the underlying concern and conflict in the play. Hence, the text is less concerned with maintaining individualism in terms of celebrating the Self against the dominant order, than with celebrating and identifying the individual within the family structure which would normally parallel and complement the governing order. Rather than an attempt at opposing these power discourses, the grandson’s fear of not being recognised by his descendants suggests the extent to which he is complicit in maintaining the existing structures of patriarchy and paternalistic regulation.

The issue, then, is to focus on the ambivalence of these sets of apparently complementary and yet conflicting discourses, and the effect this has on the protagonist. Having looked at the discourse of Confucianism, it is now time to explore the competing ideology of state regulation. The grandson’s
identification as a citizen beholden to the state is also strongly articulated in the play: he is careful to address the officer in an appropriate manner and he demonstrates an acute awareness of his subordinate position within civil society. He understands the need to be pragmatic about the use of scarce resources and respects the authority vested in rules and regulation. The play also foregrounds the ways in which hegemonic relations are maintained by both coercive and consensual means. In the first instance, there are state mechanisms such as 'the department' which regulate individual actions and which have the power to undertake disciplinary actions for non-compliance. The grandson is conscious that he has crossed the line of permissible action when he rails against an inhumane bureaucracy. His jubilant response to his own actions is both a critique of, as well as a capitulation to, the repressive political milieu. This opposition is emphasised as a shared experience with the audience during the performance:

"Aiyow! I don’t know how I got the compulsion to say all that. But I really did. I really was brave! I was really excited but I also got a bit worried afterwards. I’m sure you know what I mean. That kind of straight talk could very well get you into trouble."

(p. 44, emphasis mine)

This self-consciousness and fear of reprisal, of always being watched and evaluated within a system of normalisation, also functions in consensual ways. The uniqueness of the coffin drew many people to the cemetery and many of them had cameras, so on a number of levels, the grandson was an object of spectacle. But this surveillance does not only happen at the interpersonal level: political repression functions at its optimum when the individual becomes his/her own policing agent. The disciplinary methods are internalised by the individual so that he/she practices self-surveillance and self-censorship on an involuntary basis. This motif of constantly being watched and therefore being on guard is foregrounded repeatedly in the play when the grandson says: ‘I had a feeling that we were being watched. I don’t know why. But looking back, I still feel that way. Being watched’ (p. 33).

What is left unsaid is often more important than what is articulated. The previous discussion of the conditions of textual production begs the question as to what prompted the monologue. One could argue that the monologue functions as a confessional text which is symptomatic of the larger discourses of regulation and control that is exercised on the individual as subject to the dominant order. Foucault’s study of the regulation of sexuality through institutions of knowledge demonstrates the ways in which the confession, as a political procedure, encourages the subject to produce a discourse of ‘truth’ about his/herself. The articulation of this ‘truth’ further implicates the subject within the existing structures of power. ‘The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualisation by power’. The grandson’s monologue could be read as a reaction to the repression of an anxiety about subject positioning in the course of grappling with the demands of competing power discourses. His confession, which is superficially a ‘spontaneous’ narrative of his experience, can also be seen as a manufactured response within
a system of power which demands absolute compliance and performance of specific roles. The narrative depicts a situation in which the grandson’s loyalty is tested as he is forced to choose between competing roles. Seen in this light, the monologue is not only a public acknowledgment of a political dilemma, it is also an admittance that he has (unwittingly) crossed the boundaries permitted by the dominant order. The fact that it is a ‘Catch-22’ situation and that he would be accused of disobeying regulations either way, merely points to the extent to which hegemonic discourses are naturalised and internalised by the subject and his ‘soul’. I use the term ‘soul’ to mean what Foucault refers to as ‘the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body’. Unlike the soul represented in Christian theology which is born of original sin, the Foucauldian soul is a socially constructed entity born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint... it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledges, and knowledges extends and reinforces the effects of this power.

It could therefore be argued that the grandson’s monologue is performative beyond the obvious theatrical frame for it is also a manufactured response to a regime which produces specific forms and demonstrations of subservience that reinforce the existing power relations. The monologue not only reveals the protagonist’s anxiety about challenging regulations but paradoxically, also signals the extent to which he is aware that he must atone for this abnormal behaviour. This situation leads to the further entrenchment of his position as a subject within the regime.

The surveillance discourse is also foregrounded by the dream motif. The grandson’s narrative is framed within a dream which recurs at moments of emotional anxiety and stress. The monologue begins with the claim: ‘I don’t know why, but it keeps coming back to me. This dream. Every time I get frustrated, it comes back to me’ (p. 32). At the end of the narrative, he reiterates a similar statement as he grapples to understand the recurring presence of the dream and its significance: ‘As for me, the funeral somehow stuck in my mind and it would often come back to me. In a dream. Especially when I’m frustrated’ (p. 46).

The discourse of surveillance and self-regulation is therefore extended to a subliminal level whereupon the narrator is simultaneously involved but also distanced from his actions. He watches his own figure in the dream/play. The fact that the dream recurs at moments of frustration and uncertainty suggests that the anxieties which are usually repressed by consciousness re-surface through the unconscious. The dream motif can therefore be read as the slippage between conflicting hegemonic discourses in the social milieu. The dream is the symbolic displacement of anxieties about the Self in relation to political and social forces that inform material existence. In Freudian terminology, the dream works through the forms of condensation (the condensation of the experience of political oppression into the regulation of land by an anonymous centralising
force); symbolisation (the emblematic trope of coffins containing the contagious rottenness of dead and non-productive bodies and the holes which are designated for them in public space); and displacement (the transference of anxiety about his subjectivity onto the dilemma of fulfilling the patriarch’s final wishes). The fact that the dream occurs at moments of anxiety and emotional stress not only suggests the protagonist’s repression of the ‘sin’ of non-compliance and uncertainty about his identity, but also demonstrates the extent to which his ‘soul’ bears the effects of the disciplinary regime to the point where he is unconscious of the means by which it regulates both his conscious and unconscious actions. Thus he is aware neither of the true cause of his dream nor the source of his unease. Rather, these anxieties are manifest symbolically, in the form of the dream/play/confession.

If the subject is constructed through the network of knowledges and power effects which act upon the individual as the embodied effects of the will to power, then the ideology of Confucianism produces a particular subjectivity which may, or may not, conflict with other dominant discourse-effects. Confucianist thought establishes a mirror relationship between the ruler and the subject, and between the patriarch and his family. The Singaporean government’s sustained push to promote both Confucianism and pragmatism as economically compatible nation-building strategies suggests that this is usually a successful combination. *The Coffin* however, presents a situation where the interests of the two discourses collide, and the individual’s usual state of equilibrium is fractured and experienced as a split subjectivity.

Singapore and Singaporeans are displaced in many ways. Historically, the island has been transformed from a village milieu to that of a colony, and from that to a post-industrial capitalist state, with attendant shifts in economic, political and cultural conditions. Singaporeans are mainly of migrant stock, performing cultural practices from source cultures which most people have never experienced first hand. More importantly, the cultures of Singaporeans have fused with other local as well as Western forms. This problematises the notion of a ‘pure’ cultural experience; all Singaporean cultures are to some extent displaced and hybridised. This is a source of continual anxiety particularly in lieu of the government’s push to preserve a mono-ethnic model of multiculturalism. The rapid changes in Singaporean society in the past three decades have heightened this sense of displacement which appears endemic to many migrant and postcolonial societies. This anxiety is also expressed through the motif of the dream, and the figurative disjunction between the coffin and its hole. In the light of Singapore’s history of colonialism and diaspora, the significance of a final resting place for the body — the traditional receptacle of subjectivity — becomes overwhelming. The desire for an appropriate grave to house the body and its coffin is much more than an idiosyncratic whim; it articulates a desire to posses a final site which symbolises the integration of Self with the land and/or the communal body.

The desire for the containment of the body and the rituals that go with a traditional Chinese burial can also be read as the displacement of the desire to maintain the myth of an integrated, unified and fixed subjectivity in the face of a
contradictory and fluid external reality which demands the negotiation of various subject positions. Confucianism views the (live) body as the receptacle of a renewable tradition and knowledge and demands the repetition of a range of rituals and cultural observances such as tea-services and the visiting of ancestral graves during Qing Ming to keep the family tradition and political order alive. This reminds the individuals of roles and responsibilities to the family unit and the corresponding governmental structures. The family unit, in this respect, is a body of culture and power relations which must be guarded and perpetuated through repeated embodied actions to fight against both external forces and mortality itself.

The grandfather’s wish to be housed in an ornate and large coffin is an attempt to mark his particular importance in the family line; this wish must be followed to augur the family’s continuity and prosperity. The grandson’s singular act of courage to fulfil this wish has put a stop to the possibility of any further burial rites of this sort, thus placing his name and status, and the family lineage in jeopardy. Thus, whilst the grandfather is finally granted an appropriate resting place and the grandson’s struggle (as represented by the act of burial itself) suggests a form of closure, it is the excess of effects which cannot ultimately be controlled. This excess is inscribed onto the body of the protagonist and although he has tried to ‘bury’ his anxieties which include a fear of the future and the consequences of his actions, it continues to resurface in his weaker unconscious moments when he is less able to rationalise and naturalise these worries.

The dominance of the surveillance motif and the concern with the construction of subjectivity in The Coffin is further accentuated when the playwright’s own experience of imprisonment is taken into account. The play dramatises an awareness of being observed and regulated. More specifically, the grandson views his actions and condition purely in terms of solitude and alienation. The caretaker and officer serve as obstacles and functions of authority. Other characters such as the grandson’s wife and children remain in the background; their vague presence reinforces the picture of the lone individual struggling against dominating forces. The play foregrounds the effects of the panoptic scheme which both isolates and individualises the subject in relation to the perceived source/s of power. This serves to neutralise any possibility of political solidarity.

Foucault uses the panoptic model and the concept of a disciplinary regime as a generalised scheme to illustrate how power is exerted over the subject within the system. Power relations are presented in optimum form and abstracted from any notion of resistance or contradiction. It assumes that the power acting on the body and ‘soul’ of the subject is perceived unproblematically in a dispersed yet homogeneously experienced network of forces (ie. power impinges from everywhere and nowhere). The Coffin focuses on competing discourses of power (both of which are promoted by the dominant order) and, in doing so, deconstructs this generalised scheme of power. The play challenges the notion that disciplinary societies produce docile subjects who function as automatons of power. The grandson is highly conscious of the contradictory nature of his
situation, and while he ultimately remains a docile subject, his experience draws attention to the levels and multiplicity of hegemonic discourses which function (and often compete with each other) in a ‘real’ and materialist environment.

The play as performance further problematises the panopticon discourse which situates the subject purely in the role of an object of knowledge and control. The play foregrounds various relationships of looking which disrupt the simplistic dichotomy between the object of the gaze and the viewing, non-verifiable sources of power. There is a complex relay of looks which operates in the theatre, and within the grandson’s motif of the dream. The protagonist sees the event; he sees himself seeing the event; he sees his dream-self returning the gaze of his other multiple selves; he sees himself seeing others (the audience and other characters in the play) who are seeing the event and who see themselves seeing the event (and his role/s in it). It is this relay of looks and the constant negotiation of multiple roles and time/space variables which offer the possibility of subverting and deconstructing an otherwise closed system of power, and the subjected position of the protagonist within it. In the TheatreWorks (1990) production of the play on the island-state, the actor-protagonist physically confronted members of the audience, a strategy which, according to one reviewer, greatly unnerved the audience who ‘tried to squirm out of eye-contact’. Spotlight and the occasional use of full houselights in the theatre served to enhance these moments of physical, emotional and specular confrontation when the protagonist is clearly in control of the situation rather than the mere object of surveillance. Thus, The Coffin as a performative text offers a more specific instance of the contradictory nature of power relations. This reading supplements some of Foucault’s theories but also offers a material demonstration of the weaknesses of generalised conceptions of power. Most important of all, the play demonstrates the possibility of subversive counterpoints within the hegemonic system and offers tactical manoeuvres to achieve it.

When the grandson is pushed to a breaking point in his battle with bureaucracy, his understanding of the situation crystallises,

> You know, this is my grandfather getting buried. It is not the bottling of soya sauce; it is not the canning of pineapple cubes; it is not the laying of bricks for your HDB flats and it is not the drawing of rectangles for your parking lots. (p. 43)

In this rare moment of unguardedness and rising passion, the grandson confronts the limits of economic rationalism and its disciplinary strategies. The competing discourses of economic rationalism and Confucianism result in a moment of displacement and anxiety over the ‘correct’ form of action expected of the subject. The Coffin shows that the disciplinary strategies legitimised by the ideology of pragmatism encompass all aspects of the social body — dead and alive. They do this by means of categorisation, distribution and regulation (democracy parodied in the ‘one man, one grave, one plot’ dictum!). The aim of a disciplinary regime is to control heterogeneity as this destabilises the existing power relations. By foregrounding the competing subject positions within the power structures, The Coffin succeeds in disrupting the homogenising effects of
power. It isolates competing discourses and draws attention to the gaps in subject construction which can be used as potential sites for subversion.

This destabilising of power relations and subject positioning exposes the politically-motivated image of Singapore as a stable and orderly state where all parts of the social body consent to function in accordance with the dictates of the political hierarchy. According to this schema, the dead body is non-economically viable and should therefore be disposed of in the most cost-efficient manner (ie. least resource intensive). The dead body and the burial procedures are practices which isolate, sanitise and banish the Other from the social body so as not to disrupt its economic health and productivity. In this light, the suggestions of ‘normalising’ the burial of the overly-large coffin can be read as an attempt to contain any differences which might threaten the regulating strategies of the regime. As the voice of bureaucracy says, ‘there is no room for exceptions’ for either the dead or the living (p. 38). Exceptions are only tolerated when economic mileage can be made of an apparently dysfunctional situation, such as the placing of the unique coffin in the National Museum! In this way, the system is able to co-opt and contain differences within the existing power relations without any structural changes to the political matrix. The ‘feral’ coffin/corpse is sanitised, neutralised and re-presented as an icon of ‘traditional’ culture in contrast to its present status as a subversive counter-point to an oppressive materialistic culture.

Space in this sense can be read as more than just physical land. It represents emotional, cultural and political options which are curtailed by the existing regime. The desire for space is also the displacement of an anxiety about the need to negotiate between alternative practices and multiple subject positions within the prescribed power relations. The image of a rotting body needing to be housed in an irregular manner is therefore, also, an allegory of the desire of living bodies to be allocated alternative spaces to manoeuvre. Thus, it may be at this level of the symbolic — at the articulation of both the fear and the desire to contain the feral potential of the grandfather and his coffin — which exemplifies the the oppositional subtext of the play and its challenge to the discourse of economic rationalism and regulation.

The Coffin deconstructs the idea of the docile subject by foregrounding the grandson’s conflicting allegiances. The play disrupts the process by which subjectivity, as an unproblematic and stable construct, is manufactured and naturalised by foregrounding the gaps and negotiations that are necessarily implicated in the process of maintaining this myth. Whilst Foucault’s work on the panopticon foregrounds the manufacture of docile subjectivities, this analysis shows the levels of conflict, multiplicity and ambivalence which operate on a daily basis within such a regime. Foucault proposes that power is experienced individually from a non-verifiable source (the panoptic inmate is never able to ascertain who is doing the watching, nor when); this analysis demonstrates how the effects of power can be contradictory and diffuse, leading to a situation of split subjectivity. It is this level of contradiction and competition between differing state-endorsed discourses of pragmatism and Confucianism which fractures the monolithic schema of power relations, and
which reveals the gaps that individuals have to negotiate, both consciously and unconsciously, to survive the system. In doing so, the play shows the internal or subliminal ways in which power is exercised on the subject, and foregrounds the limits of its effectivity and authority.

NOTES

2 Kuo Pao Kun, The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole... and Other Plays (Singapore: Times, 1990). All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.
4 I use this term to mean Foucault's description of a system of finely gradated and measurable intervals in which individuals are distributed around a norm — which both organises and is the result of this controlled distribution. The main function of this system of normalisation is to regulate, hierarchise and maintain the regime of power. Michael Foucault, The History of Sexuality vol. 1, trans. Robert Huxley (1976, London: Penguin, 1990).
Be silent.
That's the passport for peace.
The country belongs to those who shut their minds,
learn to unlearn what they once believed,
apply their PhDs to save their own skins.
The country still thrives,
with little yes-men trying to act big —
'no, this cannot; no, that is too sensitive,
shut up, you're a dog barking at a hill!'
In years to come, we may completely lose our voices,
but our skins will be just as thin.

Be complacent.
That's the programme for progress.
The country belongs to computers, not ideals —
command, execute, no questions asked;
beyond the pre-set codes, VDTs blink a blank.
Thus the system thrives,
dictating what is right and what is good —
touch the wrong button and that's a bad key;
toe the on-line or you terminate.
In years to come, we may learn only to agree,
then we might lose our right to choose.

Be mundane.
That's the payment for prosperity.
The country belongs to mercenaries,
they make their money and their names,
go home to their TV sets and video.
In fantasy they thrive,
with mistresses in hot pants —
'Waa, you saw or not how sexy the men are in Baywatch?'
So your daughter shook the PM's hand aah, very good, very good'.
In years to come, we may exist in tinsel retreats,
with values culled from a bulk of pulp.
MOHAN AMBIKAIPAKER

Knowing the Natives: Racial Formations and Resistance in Early Colonial Narratives of Malaysia

If there is one major qualification to be made for the post in the post-colonial it is that the political nationalism that took formerly colonised societies into freedom and independence was, as Partha Chaterjee has termed it, a ‘derivative discourse’, which relies heavily on the paradigms and frameworks that are bequeathed by colonialism, even while appearing to be anti-colonial.

With regard to Malaysia, the area of ‘race’ is one of the institutionalised political and literary discourses which continues to occupy a dominant position in a post/neo-colonial situation. The dream of nineteenth-century European racism with its ideology of a racially coherent and homogenous nationhood is a spectre that continues to haunt the former colonial world. The hegemony of nationalism, especially elite and bourgeois nationalism emergent in the early independence period, formulates deliverance from colonial oppression as the seizure and transformation of state and society into an ethnocentric expression.

Obstacles to this kind of emancipation invariably emerge as racial, religious, or linguistic others and thereby produce the basis of social tensions of varying complexities. (Uganda, Kenya, Burma, Sri Lanka, Fiji and Malaysia are some examples.) The roots of ‘imagined communities’ in the former colonial world tend to mirror models of power that have been set up and left behind by colonialism, especially in its creation of modern bureaucratic structures that organise and articulate society in racial terms.

I. THE SALIENCE OF ‘RACE’ IN MALAYSIA

Whether it be in chauvinistic or liberal guises the discourse of ‘race’ in Malaysia is linked by an important generalisation that is true of most public discourses on ‘race’ in the world where post-structuralist discourses do not operate. All though these are already old orthodoxies in post-modern academia the terms of ‘race’ discourse out in the public realm is still a positivistic discourse that leaves intact differences of class, culture, religion, language, ethnicity and biological variations as metonyms with assigned names like ‘Malay’, ‘Indian’, and ‘Chinese’. These names operate as ‘racial’ registers with their essentialising nature left largely unquestioned. At the same time, however,
negotiations of power and privilege within the Malaysian state, and to a lesser degree in civil society, are conducted with the terms held constant. Reinforcement by institutional, organisation and policy structures perpetuate the fixed and mutually exclusive meanings of these racial terms, while at the same time a discourse of racial 'harmony' and 'unity' is developed to coordinate these racialised interests in a hierarchical and elite-consensual fashion.

Hence you have the current regime of power which consists of racialised political parties in a National Front (Barisan Nasional) where ethnic elites control the political process through 'symbolic representation', where elite economic and political interests are universalised as racial interests. Ethnic subjectivity requires Malaysians to identify with the struggles and fortunes of these ethnic leaders and their inter-elitist jockeying for power and patronage. Hence Malaysia has evolved an institutionalised form of racial politics which also enables the exploitation of class.

The evolution of this ideological hegemony has its roots in colonial politics, reflected and reproduced by colonial literature, and the purpose of this essay is to perform several 'archaeological' digs on the modern discourse of 'race' in Malaysia. It is part of a larger project of wanting to trace a Foucoulitian 'genealogy' of the racial discourse which continues to shape Malaysian society.

II. THE ROOTS OF ‘RACIAL’ DISCOURSE IN NEW IMPERIALISM

While the larger conception of this project involves looking at the onset of Western colonial intervention that begins with the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, I am going to jump ahead to ‘archaeological’ sites that are located within the later British period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another important direction that needs to be pursued is to investigate forms of discourse that have to do with existing social hierarchies like caste (darjat) that may have been hybridised and redeployed during the colonial encounter. Within the lines of Western descent, however, it is useful to mention here that one of the earliest imaginative renderings of the Malay archipelago in European history occurs in the maps of Ptolomey, which gives this geographical space its earliest known European title: The ‘Golden Chersonese’. The attractiveness and promise of this El Dorado type figuration on an early global map can account for the enormous appeal that this area had for mercantile capital in Renaissance Europe, with a continuing lineage that traces itself right through present day multinational capital’s interest in ‘East Asia’ or the ‘Pacific Rim’.

By the time of the British in Malaysia imperialism was developing discourses that not merely legitimated conquest and plunder, as in the Portuguese period of mercantile capitalism, but which functioned to transform conquered territories, people and culture for the purposes of incorporation into the needs of industrial capitalism stemming from the metropolitan centres of empire.
There is concurrently a formalistic development in colonial literature that marks this change with the advent of a form of colonial memoir known as ‘manners and customs’ texts. These texts strive to provide a mimetic rendering of newly ‘discovered’ people and culture. Responding to earlier travelogues and memoirs, these texts also form a tradition of writing where ‘knowledge’ about various colonial sites is built up.

Two new literary characters enter the landscape of the Malay states and take to the pen in accordance with this mission; they are the first modern bureaucrats who are always men and their respective spouses and heads of the colonial household, who are always women. As agents of the metropolitan centre these bureaucrats are assigned to ensure that the colonies function as efficient units of production, through the extraction of both natural resources and new capital through the institution of local taxation.

The women too had important formal roles which centred on the management of the colonial household — a highly regulated aspect of white prestige and power in colonial policy. Women writers on Malaysia like the famous Isabella Bird and Emily Innes are considered pioneer women writers and early models of independent women who defied Victorian gender norms. The looseness of gender codes in the outposts of empire, and a supply of colonised household labour afforded the surplus time which allowed colonial women empowerment through writing.

Early encounters between the colonialisers and the colonised which are depicted in the memoirs focus detailed attention on the culture of the colonised. What is at stake is nothing less than the conscious agenda of changing the identity of the colonised to fit into the needs of metropolitan capital.

The realism-infused, first person ‘objective’ narration by the colonial writers enable them to consolidate and normalise an ‘essentially’ British identity through a process of conscious differentiation from the strange and ‘other’ ‘natives’ or ‘savages’. The moment produces an alienation or denaturalisation of the culture of the colonised, which opens the space for cultural intervention and change. This mode of writing has been well-researched and theorised by Mary Louise Pratt and I draw heavily on her work in my reading of how ‘manners and customs’ function in ideological ways. The corpus of texts that I deal with are Emily Innes’ *The Golden Chersonese with the Gilding Off* (1885), Frank Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches* (1895), and Hugh Clifford’s *Bushwhacking and Other Tales of Malaya* (1916).

The representational and narrative strategies in ‘manners and customs’ are marked by an attempt to penetrate into the ‘complexity’ of the culture and psychology of the ‘natives’. This represents an important contribution towards the project of transforming the colonised into subjects within the narrative of capitalism. Swettenham’s title to his work is in itself indicative. The use of the term ‘Sketches’ points towards Swettenham’s consciousness at his own establishing role in a mimetic tradition that is expected to follow. The production of colonial knowledge on the colonised, signified here by the act of
writing, accrues for bureaucrats like Swettenham and Clifford authority and credentials for successful future careers within the imperial bureaucracy.

The same contextualisation may also extend to the writings of the women. Their secondary status by no means diminishes the contributions they make towards colonial epistemology. As Isabella Bird innocently states in the preface of her book *The Golden Chersonese*:

I hope, however, that my book will be accepted as an honest sum of knowledge of a beautiful and little-traveled region, with which the majority of educated people are so little acquainted that it is constantly confounded with the Malay Archipelago, but which is practically under British rule, and is probably destined to afford increasing employment to British capital and enterprise.

For Emily Innes, her impetus for writing was ultimately to vindicate the failed career of her husband James Innes, who had been dismissed from the civil service on account of his purported opposition to practices of slavery and nepotism by his superiors.

An important theme and expectation on the part of the colonial bureaucrat when he embarks on his mission, to both literally and metaphorically write the empire into being, is the encounter of local resistance. The encounter of resistance, however, is quickly explained through expert colonial knowledge, usually figured through colonial logic of ‘race’. Cultural or political differences are observed, noted and rationalised so that they would serve as important means of administrating the colonial subjects. Administrative or military mistakes are noted, and arguments as to improvements in administrating colonial subjects are discussed in ways that appeal to both a professional audience of fellow bureaucrats as well as an implied general readership in Britain. As Frank Swettenham, who eventually rose to the rank of Resident British Advisor to the Sultan of Selangor, begins his *Malay Sketches*:

To begin to understand the Malay you must live in his country, speak his language, respect his faith, be interested in his interest, humor his prejudices, sympathise with and help him in trouble, and share his pleasures and possibly his risks. Only thus can you hope to win his confidence. Only through that confidence can you hope to understand the inner man, and this knowledge can therefore only come to those who have the opportunity to use it.

‘Essentialist’ or ‘authentic’ knowledge of the Malays and their culture can be seen to be the key to the power of the coloniser. The construction of the ‘Malays’ as object of knowledge because of their assumed ‘nativity’ forms an important criteria in Swettenham’s observations and relates ideologically to the project of British inscription within domains of Malay feudal power.

It is a rhetorical strategy that implicitly seeks to challenge the right to rule the people on the basis not of might, but through superior knowledge. This is already the foundational premise in the notion of British benevolence towards the Malay subjects and the inadequacy of Malay feudal/elite power, which will rationalise the growing insertion of Western modernity and its systems of administration into the Malay kingdoms.
The ‘Resident Advisor’ system which emerged as the British tool of intervention into the Malay sultanates is a form of empire that I believe was peculiar to the administration of the Malay states. A move to establish complete control was not attempted until 1946 with the Malayan Union proposals. Swettenham’s goal, within the schema of the ‘resident Advisor’ system was to insert himself into an already pre-existing system of power, to convince the Malay court to accept the presence of the British Resident in the royal administration of Malay kingdoms. Hence British imperialism both drew on the legitimacy of Malay feudal/elite power (rather than dismantling it) and worked to affect changes in local economies which would serve its own metropolitan needs.

In this early phase, therefore, Swettenham had to build his credibility as the ‘expert’ advisor on administrative matters to the Malay sultan. Yet this imperial project of re-writing the colony, of displacing the indigenous world views, social structures, and ‘modes of production’ for its own purposes of inscribing colonial access and authority and control is met by a history of contestation that is little known or discussed.

These contestations produce anxieties within the colonial text which are moments of ideological contradictions that I propose reading as moments of resistance or historical agency on the part of the colonised that are an undeniable presence within colonial narratives.

III. READING RESISTANCE IN COLONIAL TEXTS

The colonial bureaucrat’s project had to encounter not only the bodies of those who were different from him but also their culture, textual technology (oral) and ‘modes of production’. Incidences of difficult encounters between the aspiring bureaucrat and the colonised subject range from miscommunication to militant resistance. The failure of the ‘natives’ to conform to the expectations of the colonial bureaucrat is a recalcitrance that threatens to unravel the bureaucrat’s claims to knowledge, legitimacy, and therefore self-actualisation and career success. These moments produce anxieties of performance for the authors who will be examined below.

One method with which the dissonance between the colonial bureaucrat’s perception of his abilities and the resistance or unwillingness of the colonised to sign on to the colonising script is dealt with through the trope of the ‘enigmatic native’. Some common examples are the ‘lazy’ Malay, ‘mysterious Arab’, the ‘inscrutable Chinese’, the ‘mystical Indian’, and so on. Kum Kum Sangari provides an excellent reading of this type of trope:

The enigmatic native is a familiar Orientalising trope that encodes, first, the incapacity of Western consciousness to apprehend the ‘native’ save as alterity, and second, the reserve, resistance, interested information, or secrecy that the coloniser repeatedly encountered and that probably indicated both a recalcitrance and a conscious strategy on the part of the ‘natives’. The stereotype of the coloniser’s notations of the enigmatic ‘other’ are systematically accompanied by vigorous
attempts (by missionaries, ethnographers, and administrators) to penetrate into the substratum of truth.\textsuperscript{12}

The following moment in Emily Innes’ work provides an example of how when the ways of the ‘Malays’ fail to register in the Eurocentric episteme, he is rendered in comical and illogical ways. The moment occurs as Innes is trying to obtain some fowl, through market methods.

Malays from the up-country used sometimes to find their way to my door, with their hands full of fowl, which they said they wished to lay at my feet. They were the poorest ryots [sic] possible with nothing on but a ragged and dirty sarong, yet they were quite horrified at my asking if they had brought their fowls to sell. They carefully explained that the fowls (perhaps several dollars worth) were a present to me; but in the same breath they suggested that if out of my compassion for them I would give them a small trifle to buy rice, it would be very acceptable. It seemed to be that the distinction between selling and this proposed proceeding was imaginary, so I used to force them in a hard-hearted way to mention a price. I generally found that the more delicacy and refinement of feeling they had paraded, the higher was the price they wanted, and the less the fowls would bear examination. The owners appeared to think that the fowls would taste better on account of having belonged to a noble race that had never soiled its scutcheon by commercial dealings, but I did not find it so. I thought it was simply a very troublesome way of marketing; but there was often no help for it, as the fowls were not to be obtained in any other ways...

The cultural conflict described by Innes suggests suspicions of deceit and, implied through her tone, of distrust and sarcasm. However, the moment can be read alternatively as an example of the difficulties and resistances encountered by British capitalism to establish its own ideological hegemony. At such moments racial difference is incorporated as a way out for the nervous writer, who is on slippery ground.

These are still early days of the British colonial presence in Malaysia, but the incident also points to the prevailing power of another non-capitalist ‘mode of production’, a form of barter and symbolic exchange of obligations or perhaps even a barter or gift economy not yet transformed and displaced by the supremacy of market capitalism, and the attendant commodification of culture and human relations.

The dependency of the colonial housewife on the natives for the supply of food, also points to the ‘dialogic’ nature of the colonial encounter with the colonised. The natives are not complete victims here, and are, in fact, attempting to educate Innes on the legitimacy of their own discourse. The lesson is lost on Innes, of course, but a measure of power on the part of the Malay villagers show them to be overcoming the force (and incredulity) of the colonial mission. The way they do this is to simply ignore the terms and conditions set by the ‘civilising mission’.

Moments of textual anxieties in ‘manners and customs’ texts also depict high intensity conflicts, that take place when resistance is more explicitly political and militant. As British intervention progresses instances of rebellion and armed revolt grew. This poses a difficult problem for the colonial writer.
Violence against the natives, undertaken to suppress rebellions, is a difficult motif to record and describe in these memoirs and travelogues since it runs counter to the premise of the colonial bureaucrat’s benevolent self-conception. The colonial bureaucrat’s promise of winning ‘devotion’ through a sympathetic and expert knowledge concerned with the progress and welfare of the ‘natives’ themselves, is ruptured by the presence of popular resistance.

In a story entitled ‘Bushwhacking’ which deals with the Mat Kilau rebellion of 1882 by another Resident Advisor, Hugh Clifford, the tensions between colonial ideology and ‘native’ recalcitrance become dramatised on the battlefield.

Clifford is leading a jungle clearing team of friendly ‘Malays’ in pursuit of the leader of a rebel Malay named Mat Kilau and his followers. The situation forces Clifford to contend with his own ill-formed and ambivalent notions of the essential Malay nature. On one hand, the Malays have become fixed for him as the ‘lazy’ native, a trope already canonised in the arsenal of colonial representations — for instance, in this rather stock stereotype by another ‘manners and customs’ writer and Clifford’s contemporary, J. D. Vaughan:

The [Malays] have remained nearly stationary, so far as their occupations are concerned; we found them fishermen and paddy planters when we came amongst them and they remain so to the present day. Not a single Malay can be pointed out as having raised himself by perseverance and diligence, as a merchant of otherwise, to a prominent position in the Colony.¹⁴

These images of the Malays as wanting in diligence and forms of the Protestant work ethic are contrasted to the descriptions of Indians as ‘an active, industrious race’, while the greatest racial accolades are given to the Chinese, ‘the most active, industrious and persevering of all’, who ‘equal or surpass the Europeans in developing the resources of the Colony’.¹⁵

These descriptions of the ‘manners and customs’ of the various ‘races’ is marked along a sliding scale of how much incorporation into the culture of capitalist development in the colonies is found. The Malays, seemingly the least incorporated of the ‘races’, are therefore seen to be the lowest on a ‘scale of civilisation’, which places the Europeans and possibly the Chinese on the top.

IV. IDEOLOGICAL RUPTURE AND RECOVERY IN COLONIAL TEXTS

Read alternatively though, as possibilities of ‘recalcitrance and a conscious strategy on the part of the natives’, we can once again discern the persistence of non-capitalist ‘mode of production’ (the ‘subsistence’ economy) acting to assert its own way of life.

The coloniser is hard pressed to account for the extraction of Malay military and transportation labour on which he is dependent for putting down the rebellion. It is a moment of ideological contradiction, especially with respect to the racial stereotypes formulated earlier.¹⁶ The attempt to resolve the
contradiction, however, is done through a recovery of the coherence of colonial epistemology and ideology:

‘Aren’t they splendid fellows?’ says the Resident enthusiastically. ‘Look at them! would you ever get white laborers to work like that? You would think that they enjoyed it, and not a man among them is getting anything except his food! ... They are wonderful fellows,’ says the Resident again. ‘I had rather have them to work with than any men I know, yet people will tell you that the Malays are the laziest animals on the face of the earth’.

‘There’s a good deal in the way you work them,’ says the second in command. ‘They will do their best for you or me because we can talk to them, understand them, and show them that we wish to consider their comfort. The Malay requires the personal motive to set him going. He will only work like this because it pleases him to serve a friend; he can see no point in toiling for a master or for a wage’.

‘That’s just it; and it is why the Malay when he works for one who knows him works as no other man can do’.16

This self-comforting recourse to essentialist configurations of ‘the Malay’ character must however contend with one important dissent: the non-conformity of Mat Kilau and the rebellion, which refuses to be rationalised within the racial schema of the colonial writer and is finally dealt with violently through a pogrom that aims to cleanse the countryside of radical forces. In ‘Bushwhacking’ we are told that the colonial troops in pursuit of Mat Kilau spend the next two years raping and bombing countless Malay villages. But for the ‘benevolent’ coloniser, this is at best a pyrrhic victory.

At a later point in ‘Bushwhacking’, even Clifford’s hard-working and native troops begin to reveal their less than committed investment in the search to capture Mat Kilau, and this recalcitrance begins to unsettle the coloniser’s system of belief. A dangerous curve needs to be negotiated by the boat on which the native troops are travelling and Clifford orders the Malay coxswain to turn around. The fearful coxswain refuses until he elicits an acceptance of a disclaimer for any responsibility for the possibility of the boat running aground: ‘If ought goes wrong will the Tuan hold him blameless?’ The ‘white man’ can only bark an order of ‘Get on!’ and therefore assumes responsibility. The abdication of the Malay coxswain’s own will falsifies the myth of what Clifford had confidently proclaimed earlier, that ‘the Malay’ gives his labour freely to those who know him well.

Another similar incident in the story arises when the team engages in gunfire with the rebels and one of the wounded Sikh soldiers comes to ask permission to withdraw. ‘Tuan, behold, I am wounded. Have I leave to retire?’ The ‘white man’ then reflects: ‘That is the beauty of the Sikh fighting machine. On the Day of Judgement he will ask an Englishman’s permission before obeying the trump of doom!’17

The significance of these two moments is that it is once again a denial of the colonial bureaucrat’s fantasy that the colonised subjects (Malay or Sikh), if they are sympathetically understood by the ‘white man’, would deliver a ‘devotion that is ready to give life itself for friendship’. The rupture caused by the acts of
‘recalcitrance’ poses a potential loss of identity of the coloniser as a benevolent figure.

The tone of the passages, which became strained and take on the distance of a third person narration (referred to archetypically now as the ‘White Man’) shows Clifford to be trying desperately to reconnect the seam of the torn colonial script by eliciting sympathy from a metropolitan audience who would identify with him. The text recovers from this crisis by essentially encoding ‘native’ behaviour as examples of typical racial traits of cowardice and the lack of will. The power/knowledge axis therefore recovers in so far as it can still just make sense of the aberrant behaviour. However, the assumption and expectation of ‘native’ assent to the idea of colonial benevolence is tenuous.

Clifford deals with this further crisis by trying to reinscribe the violence he unleashes back into the original script of colonial benevolence, incompatible as that may seem. Clifford comments that ‘he loves the folk against whom he is warring – loves them, has served them in the past, will labor to redeem them in the future’. The colonial bureaucrat’s ‘love’ is once again reflected in his assumption of knowledge about the ‘native’, and what is good for him. His identity as an expert on the ‘native’ begins to recover from its anxiety and failure:

The thing is ugly but inevitable. Our experiences in Asia have taught us that it is impossible to avoid making a little war of our own before we can hope to teach an unimaginative people the full blessings of peace.

The logic, however, is highly unstable and the coloniser is finally dealt what is perhaps the most fatal blow – his very authority even as a writer is called into question. He begins to hear of stories being circulated, probably through oral literature forms like story-telling and the wayang kulit that work to challenge his representation of history:

Can it be wondered at that, taking advantage of a credulity so limitless, the warriors give full play to their gifts for devising fairy-tales? They magnify their petty squabble with the powers of law and order into a holy war; forgetting the sordid motives which first uttered them to rebel, they develop all of a sudden all the fiery enthusiasm of the fanatic; they pose unashamedly as crusaders, who have risked and lost all things for the Prophet’s faith. Presently strange stories of the prowess begin to be passed from man to man, from village to village. At their war-yell forty Sikhs fell dead to the ground; the bullets of the infidels flattened themselves impotently against the bodies of the faithful, doing them no hurt, a villager has himself seen one of the disks of lead, a useless Christian missile; the principal Chief has recently spent three months in Kayangan — Fairyland — absorbing the magic arts which render all human tactics futile; all the rebels are invulnerable; white men and the soldier folk were slain in the tens of thousands. It is hinted that the Sultan of Stambul, the King of Siam, the Emperor of China, and every other potentate known to the Malay tradition, down to the King of Birds himself, are in league with the outlaws to drive the white men screaming from the land and to make universal the faith of the Prophet throughout the world. And all these things are believed: no internal evidence in their falsehood has any force, their inherent improbability does not weigh in the balance against their
battle for Faith, the outlaws have no difficulty in gathering a respectable number of adherents so soon as they unfurl the green standard of Muhammadan war.  

V. READING COLONIAL TEXTS IN A POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

This ultimate image of the presence of a contestation between two kinds of textualities, the oral and the written, one Malaysian and the other colonial in origin, perhaps sums up the point I would like to make about ‘race’ and strategies of reading colonial texts. The process of colonising the space that is Malaysia today took place in a context of resistance. The racial roles that had been assigned to ‘the Malays’ were from the get-go met with interventions on the part of ‘the Malays’ as well. Theories that characterise Malay identity as one of passive acceptance of benevolent neglect or enfeeblement within culturally or biologically determined codes are overdue for revision. Though they were forced to fight on different sides, both the Mat Kilau rebels and the Sikh soldiers tenuously occupied the roles created for them within the narrative of colonial divide and rule. These early and submerged histories of resistance that are veiled presences in colonial text could point towards a more complex and multiracial history of resistance that is the other face of the colonial period. The racial compartmentalisation attributed to Malaysians by colonial inscription and reinforced in the post/neo-colonial order are not our racial natures but are in fact constructed shackles of identity.

The danger of continuing this discourse and politics of ‘race’ in Malaysia is that we become trapped within the set terms that were proscribed to us by the colonial masters for the purposes of a globalising capitalist hegemony that is still perpetuating itself. The pleasure of reading the above colonial text, for me as a Malaysian, is to encounter the moments when despite all efforts to proscribe a docile compliance, the so-called ‘natives’ are seen to be struggling to assert their own radical selves.

NOTES

1 Parta Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse? (Minneapolis: United Nations University, 1986).
2 See Fanon’s critique of bourgeois nationalism in Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Early Malay nationalism as embodied in the dominant UMNO party had to eventually contend with the heterogeneity of the Malaysian reality, and the popular support commanded by the insurgent Communist movement in Malaysia during post war years. This I believe led to the current form of elite dominated consensual and coalition ethnic politics.
I owe this insight to A. Sivanandan. Personal Communication. 19 April 1999.


Ibid.

Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 80.

They really began going to the coffee shop after their neighbours stopped visiting them, and then more desperately just after that last appearance Poh Sim’s mother made. They went when the house became silent because there was no child to run around overturning chairs or knocking into doorknobs and the sharp edges of the kitchen cabinets. When the worry about the child being there when she turned round with a pot of hot water, from the stove, or of having the skin peeled off by the exhaust pipe just after he had parked the motorbike, was never going to come.

Ah Seng had been in the house when her mother and sisters came. He had risen from the second-hand armchair to receive them, but they had stood just inside the small hall, as if to get a better view of Poh Sim with all that light falling on her from the doorway.

‘Nothing will come from you,’ her mother said, her look travelling from Poh Sim’s face down to her feet. ‘Not even a girl-child!’

Even as they were leaving, Poh Sim was already withdrawing into herself. The look on her mother’s face had said that she would never have the child she had never been.

Her sisters had always forced her to stay hidden behind their skirts; they were the first to speak to visitors, whether relatives or strangers. They were always there, her sisters, in front of her, even in their parents’ presence, the father always dressed in his immaculately ironed shirt and trousers, and the mother fussing over the smallest stain on the coffee table. Her father looked at her as at some misshapen thing, with avoidance. Her mother looked at her with the disgust for something that couldn’t have come from her body; or she glanced past her, as if ashamed of something that couldn’t have come from her family. Poh Sim was just action, a doing they wouldn’t see, an obeying her parents and sisters expected. She prepared the meals, washed the clothes, swept the house, and when her sisters waded back from their friend’s house on a rainy day, even cleaned their muddy slippers. She was something on which they hung their clothes, something which was there and not there.

Then Ah Seng had come, and picked her out from her sisters. When his gaze rested on her, something stirred inside her, something like blood or maybe something like tears.

At the wedding, people didn’t look at her dress or makeup; they only looked at her as if probing deep into her flesh. Ah Seng kept looking at her, as if to share with her his swelling sense of pride. She sat beside him feeling something
like beauty flowing through her blood. Even her parents smiled at her as she lifted her dress above her big and knobby ankles to come down the dais and follow Ah Seng to the decorated bridal car; but her sisters’ faces were fungus-covered stone, like the walls of the bathroom, where she had washed their clothes or slippers.

When she passed the red-bannered doorway and into Ah Seng’s modest house, she was ready to start the life she had never lived. Ah Seng, with the money he had saved up for the wedding, and all that would follow, surrounded her with red during the first month of their marriage: red eggs, pig’s blood cooked with chilli and pepper, the red cockerel. And there had been her own blood, which had smeared the bed sheets during those first few nights. Her new neighbours came to visit her often, their faces filled with wondering sympathy for her and Ah Seng. Even her sisters dropped by, wanting to know. But the months passed, and nothing happened. And the visitors trickled away into a noticeable absence.

Then her mother and her sisters had come with that look that curdled the slip and tumble of that strange beauty she had begun to feel, lately, within her.

‘We still have ourselves,’ Ah Seng said, touching her shoulder.

Poh Sim didn’t look up, deciding she would grow her hair long and hide inside its darkness so that even Ah Seng wouldn’t see her.

Ah Seng was patient; he talked to her, he soothed her, but he couldn’t reach into her through the touch of his hands or his words. Lying in bed at night, beside all that turned-away flesh, he racked his mind on how to get Poh Sim out of the darkness where she hid herself. He remembered the time his family had piled insult after insult on him, and a darkness had come to press upon him. He had gone, in desperation, to the temple he remembered going to with his parents, when they were still pious, and lighted some joss-sticks, moving his lips as if in prayer, the bald priest watching him all the time. When he turned to go, the priest with the mesmerizing stare came up to him, and laying a hand on his shoulder, said, ‘You’re in trouble. But you’ll be shown the way out.’ As he cycled away, he remembered watching, as a child, the bald priest with the piercing stare lay his hand on the shoulders of women who couldn’t give birth, and in difficult cases, throwing a dice and writing down a Chinese character on yellow paper for them to keep next to their breasts, and they returning several months later, round-bellied and the their faces shining with happiness.

It was after that visit to the temple that he had found himself in the eyes of the young woman, the daughter of the hardware shop owner, and in the eyes of the customers.

He had tried several jobs by then, which the family thought only brought more shame to its name. He had dropped out of school while his brothers and gone into business, journalism or teaching. His sisters married early, and only showed up on the second day of Chinese New Year. And he had remained inside that thing his parents, brothers, and especially his sisters, had made for him. The thing that said he was a good-for-nothing, the thing that said no one would respect him, the thing that said that he should be ashamed of himself.
He switched jobs again, and went to work in a hardware shop. At first, he changed into a pair of brown shorts and a T-shirt the minute he got there, and stood at the side of the shop, among bags of cement, barrels of changkul and broom handles, rolls of wire and nylon netting, and towers of plastic pails and basins. When a customer made some purchases, he carried them out to the lorry or van or car; and he shovelled sand from the mountain-like piles into the backs of larger lorries. He hunted for long-forgotten or mislaid items among the wooden boxes in the dark and crowded back of the shop. He cleaned rusty files, saws and hammers, oiled them, and made them glisten again. And he laboriously labelled the various shelves. By the time the end of his workday came, he was as dusty as the road that fronted the shop, and he had to pour water over himself in the urine-charged bathroom and change into his trousers and shirt, before cycling home.

But his mother didn’t respect him though he gave his wages to her; his father didn’t even look at him. He hated it the most when his elder sister came with her children, the boys lugging their schoolbags, their hair still wet from their bath, and the girls wearing fancy dresses, looking like the dolls he had seen in the Western-style shops in the city. ‘This one old for his age,’ his sister said. ‘That one too smart. That girl have many boys waiting already. The young one already know piano. Some people I know have nothing.’ And she had looked straight at him, she who never even went to the temple!

Back at the shop, the following day he forgot to change into his work clothes. The shop owner’s daughter, looking shyly at him from behind the wide, abraded and chipped counter, didn’t send him to the shelves in the dark at the back. The customers shook their heads when he wanted to take their purchases out to their vehicles. They went to him first, not the owner’s daughter; they told him what they wanted. And he spoke to the young woman behind that scarred counter; she wrote down what he said, and shouted to some workers. And he thought, ‘She’s writing down my words. She’s changing my words into action. This is respect!’

He had come out of the thing!

He went to the priest, on his way to work, the following morning. The priest took one look at him, and said, ‘You and your wife in trouble.’

‘You’ve to help us,’ Ah Seng said, not flinching under the priest’s piercing stare.

‘Give me your full names.’

When Ah Seng did, the priest brought out some sheets of paper, threw a dice several times, referred to a book, and calligraphed each sheet with a Chinese character.

‘Bad blood inside and outside you,’ the priest said. ‘Must let in fresh blood. Need reflection, physical and mental. Need to reflect on others and be reflected by others. Must be others before being yourselves. Must become object before becoming your own subject. The reflections will make more reflections. Then nothingness.’

‘What does reflection mean?’
The priest gave him that mesmerizing stare, once more, mysterious and flaying. He had spread out the sheets before Ah Seng, as he recited and briefly explained each character; now he placed them in order, the last first, and made them into a multi-layered packet. He handed the packet to Ah Seng, and said, ‘Once she reaches a stage in the reflection, you’ve to take out the correct sheet, fold it, and put it away in a box. After the last sheet has been reached, you’ve to burn all the papers in front of the family altar. This knowledge only for you two. If others guess it increases the potency.’

‘How do I begin?’ Ah Seng said.

‘The way will show itself,’ the priest. ‘Out of confusion comes knowledge.’

He mulled over the priest’s words at work in the hardware shop, among the dull nails and sharp files, but they still didn’t make any sense to him. On the way home, he stopped at the coffee shop where he and Poh Sim, finding the loneliness at home unbearable, had had dinner on some nights. Sometimes they had sat, late into the night, like outsiders — the other customers avoided looking at them — observing the goings-on at the other tables, he over a Stout, and she over a Milo, before going home to a barren bed.

He ordered a bottle of beer this time and sat staring before him.

‘Confusion!’ he muttered to himself. ‘Reflections, object, subject, nothingness! The priest isn’t a priest this time. He’s just making a joke of me!’

‘You talking to me, Mister?’ someone from the next table, said.

When he turned towards the voice, he saw a neatly dressed young man looking at him, as did a few people from the other tables, with a mild curiosity.

He shook his head at the stranger. Why hadn’t he thought of that? He drank the beer with relish, slowly, contemplatively, and then rode home, the warm evening air turning cold against his excitement.

Until they started frequenting it, the coffee shop was all business and movement: the coffee shop ‘boys’, really men, at least one of them shuffling about like a zombie, went the round of the drink-enclosure, table and counter, like satellites around some invisible sun. At the tables, customers sat singly or in groups, in self-imposed solitude or self-imposed camaraderie. There was that group of Chinese construction workers, painters and finishers (these men brought the plastering of walls to a fine smoothness), who, cement-splattered and paint-smeared, began moulting their work-skins before going back to their families. One of them sat cross-legged on the chair, as if folding his legs away for the day; another let his arms dangle by his sides, acknowledging their uselessness until the following morning. A noisy bunch of Indians came in, only to grow nosier as they emptied bottle after bottle of Stout. There was about these people a quiet desperation, as if going home was going back into some dimness that smothered them.

That first day at the coffee shop, after he had confided, uncertainly, the meaning of the priest’s words to Poh Sim, Ah Seng took out a framed photograph from his shoulder bag, and showed it to her.

‘You like it?’

‘I not there,’ Poh Sim said, only seeing the darkness her mother and sisters had put into her.
‘You always there,’ Ah Seng said. ‘For me.’
But Poh Sim only withdrew deeper into her hair.
A snigger came from the counter, where a boy had been poring over his
books beside his mother, the shop owner.
‘Look! Look!’ the boy said.
‘What to look?’ the proprietress said, cuffing him on the shoulder. ‘You only
want to forget your books!’
Then she looked up, and saw a middle-aged man, shirt sticking to his sucked
in belly, cheek bones shiny against the gathering dusk, holding out a photograph
to a woman, who spilled all over the chair; the proprietress quickly returned to
concentrate on the money in the cash-register.
The construction workers and the Stout drinkers a few tables away, repulsed,
tried to not even glance in their direction.
The next time Ah Seng and Poh Sim went to the coffee shop, it was late
evening, and the tables were already filling. A group of girls came and occupied
a table not far from them, girls who may have just got into work or were the
daughters of rich people. They might as well have been on another planet; they
giggled hysterically, and kept calling for drinks and bowls of noodles, unaware
of anything except themselves. They glistened with the flesh of the careless
young, showing here a midriff, there a cleavage and elsewhere pale, casually
spread-out thighs. The cement-layer self-consciously peeled off some dried
splotches on his sleeves; the finisher scraped at the paint that skinned his palms.
The Indians ordered another bottle of Stout, their talk grazing at arms, breasts
and thighs.

‘Come out of your hair, and see,’ Ah Seng said.
She raised her head, and saw the men gazing at and grazing on the flesh of
those young women. And she recalled the glow she had felt when Ah Seng had
gazed at her in the same way, that time, some years ago, and picked her out
from her sisters.
The proprietress looked up when she heard her son’s snigger. Poh Sim
wasn’t wearing her baggy pants and shabby blouse. Instead, she wore a tank top
and a calf-length skirt. Most important of all, she had cut her hair so her face
could be seen! The proprietress tried not to smile, and kept cuffing her son on
the shoulder to stop him from laughing. But they became still when Ah Seng
came. He wore a well-ironed shirt and neatly creased trousers, and a young
man’s smile on his face.
He moved with a newly discovered sense of purpose, and was at Poh Sim’s
side before she had time to look up at him with surprise. Nevertheless, she did,
the surprise sitting on her pudgy face with an unaccustomed grace. And she
smiled, her lipsticked and, for some reason, swollen lips parting with breathless
expectation. Ah Seng smiled at her, and pulled the chair closer to her side before
sitting down. He took her hand, caressed it with shy pleasure, and almost
brought it to his lips in cavalier fashion, then shaking his head, put it back gently
on the table. Poh Sim sat there, a mannequin, quivering under the siege of
strange feelings that the stares from the other tables pinned on her.
The coffee shop itself seemed to shine with a new light. The harshness of the fluorescent tubes fell away into the background as the faces at the other tables filled out with curiosity and puzzled gazing. The proprietress, subdued, went softly about her work at the counter; and she didn’t raise her hand to cuff her son when he ignored his books, and looked at the couple. The construction workers who should have pushed back their chairs and departed, lingered. The Stout drinkers held back their 

Ah Seng looked about himself with appreciation, but Poh Sim only sat there trembling with fear. Ah Seng turned to her and whispered encouragement, but she only kept her head down and tried to stretch her skirt farther down her legs. Ah Seng suddenly bent down and brought out a ribbon-tied packet of yellow paper from his shoulder bag, tapped on it, and mumbled explanations. Then their heads came together in some kind of a ritual closeness, and all the customers heard was a whispered urgency. When they finally stirred out of their mesmerizing stillness and left, Poh Sim still trembling, the other customers, the businessmen, middle-class office and private sector workers and their families, and the academic and his children, began to talk, with unnatural loudness, as if released from some primeval emotion.

When she heard the snigger at her elbow, the proprietress cuffed her son on the shoulder.

‘Don’t make fun!’ she said. ‘They’re bringing the customers.’

She had seen the man, the other time, the customers watching intently, draw out a sheet from the yellow, calligraphed packet, and put it away in the box, which he had also brought out from his shoulder bag.

Poh Sim sat, as she had done the first time, but now spilling out of her tank top, the black band of cloth, standing in for her bra, barely doing the job, waiting for Ah Seng. She had bitten her lips until they were red, as Ah Seng had asked her, to make the blood come. The proprietress turned away, suddenly shy, but the boy pulled at her sleeve, nodding towards the table. Ah Seng had come, with a mixed bouquet of flowers in his hand. Poh Sim looked up, her eyes glinting, and then ducked into her shyness.

‘You can’t be like this, Poh Sim,’ Ah Seng said. ‘You must take.’

She shook her head.

‘I look everywhere for the flowers,’ he went on. ‘Just take, lah.’

The proprietress and the people at the other tables, watched, forks, spoons and chopsticks paused over steaming dishes. Would she shake her head again? Ah Seng sat down close to her, and took her hand, but unlike the other time, he brought it to his lips and kissed the palm. The proprietress’ son sniggered, but
she turned and cuffed him. She watched them for a while, a smile on her lips, remembering the time her would-be husband had fumbled shyly for her hand. She turned to her son, and this time impulsively rumpled his hair. He, puzzled, bent down over his books.

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers, forgetting the lateness of the hour, watched Ah Seng and Poh Sim and, in spite of themselves, rubbed their chins or the rim of their glasses, vaguely moved.

The people at the other tables rested their fingers on the thin paper napkins or stained forks and spoons, watching, then sighed and returned to their meals and conversations, as if they had not been interrupted at all.

Poh Sim had accepted; she held the bouquet, wrapped in ordinary newspaper and tied with a faded ribbon, for a while, then placed it with quivering hands at her side. Ah Seng bent down, brought out the yellow packet and box, and put away another sheet of paper, then looked at Poh Sim with admiration. When they left, they glowed as if with recaptured youth, and the people at the other tables looked at each other, their faces gleaming with incomprehensible yearning and nostalgia. The construction workers pulled back their chairs, roughly, as if angry with themselves, and went towards their motorcycles; the Stout drinkers gazed at the empty table as at some youthful reassurance suddenly removed from them.

The next time Poh Sim arrived first, wearing a dark dress, a wedding present from Ah Seng, but now too tight, and sat waiting for him. He came later, bearing a single rose, and a gift wrapped up in red paper. The proprietress cast more than the usual glances in their direction. Her son didn’t snigger; he looked at them as if his books didn’t interest him any more. The other tables, swollen with more than the usual crowd, kept gazing at them, as if waiting for some forgotten feeling to be drawn out from deep inside them.

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had racked their minds for something that would let them into the reflection they saw on the faces in the coffee shop; they recalled their earlier sojourns there, and suddenly memories had come to them, redolent with ritual intimacies and heart-wringing gestures.

‘Good sign,’ Ah Seng said. ‘This is reflecting.’

‘We shouldn’t do this!’ Poh Sim said.

‘We’re only being others before being ourselves,’ Ah Seng said. ‘Mustn’t forget the priest’s words.’

When Poh Sim saw the faces at the other tables, the last traces of her resistance crumbled: they were turned in her direction, with a curiosity as open as an invitation into their midst. She also recalled Ah Seng’s words, ‘Don’t let your mother’s and sisters’ bad blood stay inside you. Must find fresh blood.’

Oh, that Ah Seng, she thought, waiting, with the warmth of all those eyes on her, he always thinking so of me! Why his mother never know his affectionate heart?

When he placed the red rose before her, she picked it up with oohs and aahs, as she had seen the other woman do some time ago in the coffee shop. She looked up at Ah Seng, her eyes watering, hoping they were bright with her gratitude. Then she put down the flower — he had bought this one, not plucked
it off some bush — and straightened herself so that her own flesh seemed to fall away, and some other flesh had come to inhabit her body.

The proprietress’ face was already softening with some nostalgia; and the faces at the other tables were melting away into the hidden regions of themselves. That was when Ah Seng snapped his finger, as the other man, the husband, had done, and a waiter hurried from the kitchen to their table.

The people at the other tables were already watching, as if looking into something inside themselves they didn’t know was there. Ah Seng curved his hand, as the other man with his pale and smooth hands had done, to make a bowl, turned his thumb into a spout of water, and wriggled his fingers into heat. Like the other man, he didn’t say a word. The waiter came out of his confusion and nodded vigorously, and went and fetched the things. And then it was her turn. She held the chopsticks and porcelain bowl with the tips of her fingers, as if they were dirty objects, then dipping them in the bowl of hot water, moved them around. Then she wiped them with a paper napkin and placed them beside their plates.

Then she sat back, bit her lips, and gazed at a task well done. Ah Seng patted her on her plump hand, and held out the gift over the steaming dishes the waiter had placed on their table. Poh Sim leaned back, and clasped her hands in delight, and once again gazed at Ah Seng, as the other woman had done, as if she had seen no other man like him.

‘Why you do this?’ Poh Sim said, not knowing the exact words the other woman had used.

‘You must take,’ Ah Seng said, substituting his own words for the man’s.

The proprietress froze at the cash-register; her nostalgia turned into remembrance. She recalled the barren couple that had celebrated the wife’s birthday right there in the coffee shop. He had rung her up, and said he wanted a special menu. Did she have that? And flowers. Did she know anything about flowers? She who had been standing behind the counter only a few months, could only gasp into the mouthpiece. What was that? Oh, never mind, he would bring them himself, and he had come with some roses and a gift. The proprietress looked at the couple once again, with a brooding sympathy, and then stiffened with pride thinking of how she had built that invisible world of hers, changing into a new dress everyday, borrowing some of her customers’ gestures, and putting a carelessness into the way she received money from them.

Poh Sim and Ah Seng turned to their food, he putting bits of meat and vegetables on her plate, she shaking her head all the time, but accepting the choice morsels, both guided by the memory of what they had seen. The people at the other tables now looked at them not with faintly troubled expressions, but as if they had inadvertently exposed their soft under-bellies. When Poh Sim took up the glass of Chinese tea, daintily, and sipped it as if she was sipping a rare brandy, they too, like the proprietress, shook their heads, wondering at their acquiescence to a vaguely sensed folly, and returned to their meals and conversations.

‘Why they turn away?’ Poh Sim said, looking at the faces bent over steaming dishes or hovering above the inconsequential flow of words.
‘Maybe some darkness frighten them,’ Ah Seng said, putting away another sheet into the box.

When they returned to the coffee shop, after days of discussion, they went back with the desire to turn those new anxieties that quivered at the other tables, into reassurance. They remembered the man with the shiny, expensive car, and how the people at the tables had bent down to their meals with barely concealed loathing. He had got out of the car and stood holding the passenger door open; the wife, putting her feet out as if the road was too dirty for her, alighted. They stood stiffly, waiting for their children, who scrambled out, continuing a fight they had started inside. Their hands grasped for holds on the body, but they only left a trail of their sweat on the shiny paint-work. The man hit them then, shouting, ‘You want to scratch the car? Not happy until you see lines everywhere?’ The woman had stood by, watching, and then taking out a soft, yellow cloth from the glove compartment, wiped off the marks, her lips twisted in disgust.

Poh Sim didn’t sit down and wait for Ah Seng that evening. She had discarded her tank top and short skirt for a low-necked, knee-length dress, and she walked up and down in front of their usual table. The proprietress looked across the tables at her. Her son sniggered, but she didn’t cuff him.

‘Pig’s legs!’ the boy said, and hooted with knowing laughter.

The proprietress looked at him; he had been like that even when he was a baby. If not for him, she wouldn’t be at the counter, her husband not even at her side. Dying when the boy was born, and she thinking she had nothing to live for. And the mirror in the room showing her dishevelled hair, hopeless face, then the boy suddenly kicking and crying there in the cot, as if with some secret knowledge. She had cleaned herself up, discarded her mourning clothes, and gone down to make her entry into the coffee shop business. Everything had been so frightening! The customers most of all taunting her with all those comments. You still young, what! Looking for another man? And when she persisted in not looking at them. Maybe she bring bad luck, lah! Maybe something wrong there, lah! Their sharp eyes had glinted downwards, and their words had cut at her flesh! But she had kept the barbs out, for something else had stirring inside her. Something like a soft longing at her breast; something like a remembrance of strength removed from all that mess and noise that had gone on around the tables. Just like in that woman now, a soft gleam of hope in the folds of all her flesh.

‘Look! Look!’ her son said, sniggering.

Ah Seng had arrived in an old Toyota Corolla, but though Poh Sim had seen him, she continued to stroll up and down near the table.

‘You coming?’ Ah Seng shouted.

Poh Sim jerked her head in his direction and gave him a scornful look.

‘The car not clean!’ she said.

‘No need to show temper!’ he said, and taking out a soft, yellow cloth from the glove compartment, glossed the doors and windows.

‘Now come, lah,’ Ah Seng said. ‘We’ll be late!’

Poh Sim thrust an accusing finger at him.
‘You the late one!’ she shouted. ‘Not I!’

‘Come, lah!’ Ah Seng said.

Poh Sim strode up to the car, tried to lift her skirt daintily, then threw herself into the passenger seat; Ah Seng banged the door shut, went to his side, got in, and they drove off.

The proprietress watched them go, thoughtfully. Ah Seng, behaving like one of her regular customers, had somehow awakened something else in her. He seemed to recall for her the struggle she had had against the glossy rim of some hidden world, against the glinting surface of a zealously guarded pride. And that yellow cloth in his hands, she knew, shaking her head, would be a useless talisman against all the stares that fell on the barren expanse of his wife’s flesh.

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers, having overstayed again, bewitched by the drama, found their earlier wonder and amusement being slowly replaced with misgivings; the painter fidgeted with his cigarette, the finisher barely touched his coffee, and the Stout drinkers gazed away into a diminishing repertoire of lewd jokes. There floated before the construction workers TV screens and radio speakers pouring out futile images and meaningless songs and words into dust-laden living rooms; there floated before the Stout drinkers flapping sarungs and blouses and tattered schoolbags, all shored against the inevitable neatness of bare, middle-class lives.

At the other tables faces rose above the food, the soft, glossy bemusement in the eyes turning into stone-cold stares. The proprietress shivered, remembering her early days at the counter, and reached out and laid her hand on her son’s warm shoulder. The boy looked up at her, then returned to his book, to glimpse figures that had nothing to do with his scrollwork.

The proprietress knew something was amiss when the construction workers and the Stout drinkers didn’t come as often as they had done before, but the tables filled during those hours when the fluorescent lights blazed away at bulging jowls, thick and smooth as wallets. The tables crossed with sharp glints, coming, it seemed to her, from probing eyes and secretly fed appetites. The proprietress, surveyed, pleased, the men not yet out of their work shirts, ties and work-creased trousers or come from thickly-curtained air-conditioned bedrooms, in casual jeans and T-shirts, bristle about the business of ordering food, the wives allowing the rotating wall-fans to riffle, now and then, their loose blouses, with a self-conscious indifference; the children scampering about careful not to crumple the thick protectiveness they had brought from their affluent homes. The proprietress turned her gaze to the table Ah Seng and Poh Sim usually occupied, but they were not there that evening. As she turned back to survey once again the rich and faintly clamorous crowd at the tables, she thought she saw a blade-like stare directed at the couple’s table, but she only saw the Professor who, his children strenuously matching their chess wits at either side of him, was licking his thin lips and gazing, as if disappointed, at some text that had failed to illuminate.

‘No need to wait for them, Ma!’ the proprietress’ son said, giggling at her elbow.
She had been looking out, and wondering at the late evening light that fell on the road and across the empty tables.

‘Can’t just look, ah?’ she said, raising her hand to cuff him.

‘You bluffing, Ma,’ he said, ducking.

‘You read your books now!’

‘What for, Ma?’

‘So you don’t have to do what I’m doing!’ she said, thinking of her husband’s abruptly snapped-off dreams and the Professor’s children, who were always bending over their chess-set or some book.

‘Boring, Ma!’

‘You read!’ she said, remembering her first days in the coffee shop.

Coming out from the dark protective shield of her room, she had suddenly been struck by all the harsh glitter of cutlery and talk that came from the tables. Feeling a stranger in the dress she wore — she had only worn the cheongsam or samfoo until then — she had gazed at all the bright attractiveness, yet sensed a hidden, corrosive aggression. No, not that vulgar manliness the men had thrust at her, but something more subtle, something that sawed like a rusty knife at her innards. She remembered that rich man, so proud of his shiny car, who had suddenly summoned her to his table one evening. No, not in a rough manner, but with an almost suave flow of words, his teeth bared either in a grin or in an expansive tolerance.

‘This the way you train the waiters?’ he said, gesturing at the plates, forks and spoons, his family looking on with a smooth indifference.

‘I’m new,’ she said.

‘Nothing to do with being new,’ he said, laughing gruffly, and his wife and children giggling behind politely held hands.

‘I’ll call the waiter,’ she said.

‘No need,’ he said. ‘You do it’.

I said ‘I’m new’.

‘Then time to stop being new!’ His wife had laughed then, showing her slightly yellowed teeth. She busied herself at the table, their critical glances sharpening themselves on her, as if they were blades that mustn’t lie in idleness.

‘All right?’ she asked. The man turned a lip-twisted face to her.

‘You call this all right?’ And she had had to do the work again, until the wife sighed with a desultory satisfaction and the children waved her away with languid playfulness.

The boy looked up at her and, sensing some deep-seated anxiety, bent down to his books. She stood contemplating the yellow light that fell on everything with a razing sullenness. She recalled Ah Seng sitting still and looking reflectively at the yellow sheet of paper he had put into the box, that last time. And Poh Sim fidgeting with the hem of her tank top. She remembered the faces at the other tables, turned towards them with the glaze of a stilled menace. In spite of all the years of watching faces and frenzied movements in the coffee shop for sudden happenings, she had always been defeated by that stillness. The coffee shop would be business and routine for months and then, suddenly, some hostility would burst out between the workers; the coffee shop would be all
calm and smoothness and, suddenly, some violence would flash out from the depths within the customers. Even after she had learned to cast her own subtle air of control over the coffee shop. And there was that larger unpredictable stillness always gathered outside her coffee shop, which she only vaguely understood, and feared.

She saw the construction workers coming in suddenly, bearing an aloofness in their bodies she froze against, and, following them the Stout drinkers, bearing on their faces the tensed, surreptitious laughter she recoiled from.

‘Something going to start, Ma,’ her son said.
‘Your books tell you that?’
‘I just know.’

He had spoken like that too, when the suppressed memories of her husband had come back at her with a stinging vengeance.

‘You be all right, Ma,’ he had said. ‘I can see.’

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers sat within the nearness of some conspiracy, at earshot distance from the couple’s table. The painter took out from the folds of his work-shirt a newspaper packet tied up with a yellow ribbon, and laid it on the table in front of him just as Ah Seng had done with his some time ago. The finisher reached out and fiddled with the ribbon, but the painter struck his hand away, saying. ‘Not time yet!’ That zombie waiter uncoiled himself from the afternoon lethargy and shuffled up to the tables.

‘Drinks?’ he said.

“I just like sit here,’ the painter said.

‘We waiting for important people, lah,’ the finisher said.

‘Something waiting to happen, Ma,’ the boy said.

‘Nothing happen in my shop,’ the proprietress said.

‘You just bluffing, Ma!’ the boy said, and, giggling. ‘Look! Look! Nothing happen, huh?’

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had appeared from out of the yellow, mesmerizing evening, and taken their place at the table.

‘Look, Ma, look!’ he said.

‘What to look?’

Then she noticed a taut menace in all that stillness. Though the construction workers and the Stout drinkers didn’t look at Ah Seng and Poh Sim. their every action seemed to be directed at the couple. The painter snapped his fingers, summoning the somnolent waiter.

‘Don’t want our money, ah?’ he said.

‘You said...’ the waiter drawled.

‘I’m saying now!’ the painter said. ‘Bring beer and,’ he pointed to the Indians, ‘bring them Stout.’

The painter then thrust out an insouciant hand and drew the ribbon-tied packet towards him and, leaning forward, said, ‘Want to know what inside?’

The Stout drinkers craned their necks from their table, and one of them said. ‘Funny pictures, ah?’

‘No, lah!’ the painter said. ‘Better than that!’

‘Ma, they up to no good,’ the boy said at the counter.
The painter poured out the beer, when it arrived, in an exaggeratedly dignified way, and the Stout drinkers oohed and aahed every time he let the foam hang in a precipitous quiver at the rim of the glass.

Then the painter raised his glass, and they followed, and all sipped the beer and the Stout, with a contemplative air.

Then they put down their glasses, looked at each other as if they had discovered taste, took paper napkins from the holder, and wiped their mouths, daintily.

The proprietress, contemplating them, felt herself drawn towards some familiar and yet frightening emotion; the boy kept his steady eyes on them.

The painter hunched forward in his chair, and undid the ribbon on the packet.

The sheets were clippings from a Chinese newspaper that was fond of publishing sensational news and, sometimes, outrageous scoop pictures. The painter smoothed them out as if they were dry, crackling parchment, with obvious delight.

‘Magic show, ah?’ one of the Stout drinkers said.

‘Real show, lah,’ he said, drawing out and displaying a sheet. ‘Where you can see like this one?’

It was covered with the graphic deformities of the crippled: swollen, hanging lips, fan-like ears, enlarged, bumpy foreheads, pendulous, slack breasts, elephantine, stony legs, and jutting, craggy knees.

‘Wah, wah!’ the finisher said. ‘You really find it this time, man!’

‘This even better, lah!’ the painter said, drawing out and displaying another sheet filled with human freaks: the Cyclops-eyed, the double-headed, the four-legged, two of them hanging from the waist like questioning appendages, and the feet of a man, splayed and cleft like hoofs of some mythical horse.

The construction workers and the Stout drinks oohed and aahed at the tables.

The proprietress saw that Ah Seng and Poh Sim had come out of their mesmerized state, and were watching and listening to them with fear and a puzzled embarrassment.

‘They up to no good, Ma!’ the boy said.

‘Shouldn’t have such paper near them,’ the proprietress said.

‘This one really shiok, lah!’ the painter, taking out a photograph of a couple caught in the garish light of a nightclub. The woman was fat beyond the compass of the camera, and the man was a stick-like grasshopper crawling, lost, against all that flesh.

The other construction workers and the Stout drinkers oohed and aahed, with quivering appreciation.

‘I really dig this, man!’ a Stout drinker said, rising and peering over the shoulders of the others.

The painter waved the photographer’s grotesque humour above his head.

‘Everybody see already?’ the painter said.

Ah Seng stood up then, and rushed up to their table and seized the sheaf of obscene images.

‘Wah, he like them so much!’ the finisher said.
‘Don’t make fun!’ Ah Seng said.

‘Who making fun?’ the painter said, standing up.

‘There going to be fight, Ma!’

‘Nobody fight in my place,’ she said, going up to the tables, but even as she did so she felt that strange bristling of familiar yet primitive hackles in the air. Like that time that rich customer had called her to his table. She had come among the painter, the finisher, the cement mixer, the other construction workers and the Stout drinkers, inevitably, as into the midst of the smoky figures she had avoided for so long. They had lain beneath the skin of those rich people who came smacking their lips and gazing about in an unseeing way, and now she saw them rearing in the hidden darkness of those people around her.

‘Tell them that!’ she heard the painter say, in a voice she thought came from a more recent primitiveness. A primitiveness that she had seen in the shine of car ownership, in the languor of women sitting within their sulky possessiveness, and in the dull pride in stubby fingers and spade-wielding dexterity. ‘They not using this place like a coffee shop.’

‘They using this place like a dirty cinema!’ she heard Ah Seng say, and thrust into her hands the sheaf of newspaper photographs. She gazed at them, at first with curiosity and then with a feeling that surpassed disgust and pity.

She raised her head and looked at Poh Sim, who sat there at her table, within flesh that trembled with a primordial and statuesque indignation. The proprietress turned to the construction workers.

‘This make you something?’ she said.

‘They make us nothing!’ the painter said. ‘You not ashamed?’

‘You make yourself nothing!’

‘You pay for this!’ the painter said.

‘You pay for your drinks before you go!’

She waited. The construction workers and the Stout drinkers stood up, and their hands, turning into demeaning muscle, threw money on the tables; and their hips and legs, turning into hurt dignity, thrust their way out of the shop.

Ah Seng returned to his table, and took Poh Sim’s hand and caressed it with a child’s unselfconscious concern. When the proprietress turned to them, they looked at her, Poh Sim with a trembling gratitude on her lips, and Ah Seng with the glimmer of a strange joy on his face. The proprietress smiled at them in some confusion, and walked slowly back to the counter.

‘You be all right, Ma,’ the boy said, turning a bright and serious face to her. ‘You really you just now.’

The proprietress didn’t notice it at first, the subtle dimming of the light that fell on everything in the coffee shop, after her confrontation with the construction workers and the Stout drinkers. The couple had stayed away for a few days, of course, temporarily robbing the coffee shop of some of its colour, but that was only to be expected. The waiters moved about more slowly among the customers, sometimes even knocking into the tables, as if they were preoccupied with some part of themselves they had just remembered. Her regular customers, that anonymous crowd, sat looking restlessly into the night air or talking quietly among themselves. Her other, more affluent patrons had begun to
drop off, and those who still came sat with at their meals absent-mindedly, as if they were in a hurry to get somewhere else. The Professor still came with his children, but they too, were, for some reason, restive.

Then Ah Seng and Poh Sim appeared with that look on their faces. It didn’t puzzle her anymore, for she had meditated on it, looking into the silence that fell into the coffee shop during its off-peak hours. But it had a strange effect on the customers. If it irritated and even made her desperate, it only awakened an abrasive and sinewy sullenness in the other customers. A hand would lie loosely, potently, beside a steaming dish, or a leg thrust itself beyond the table with a faintly hostile insouciance. The Professor too, leaned unnecessarily heavily on his children, telling them not to fidget or gaze about emptily.

The couple had been coming regularly, late in the evenings, Ah Seng carrying his shoulder bag, and Poh Sim wearing a low-necked dress that struggled to keep in her breasts, waist and thighs. He brought out the yellow packet and folded and put away a couple of sheets. And they always smiled in her direction, as if she was a mirror propped up on the counter beside the cash-register. When they sat there, their faces shining with that strange and innocent desire, they somehow provoked wary shoulders and more contemptuous lips, at the other tables. It was then the menacing stillness the proprietress sensed just outside her coffee shop, came to whisper among the tables.

She had been standing behind the cash-register, listening to that quivering stillness, when she saw the barren couple walk into the shop. He hadn’t rung up and ordered a special menu — they came only during anniversaries — and he didn’t bear a gift in his hand. He smiled at her, pulled out a chair for his wife, and looked at the table where the couple sat, under the distracting glow of all that self-belief.

Even as she gazed, wondering, at that unannounced arrival, she heard the BMW drive up and park beside the shop.

‘The car-man here also, Ma!’ her son said, his breath warm and uncertain at her elbow. ‘They strange, lah, today.’

The family didn’t enact the drama of snobbery and pride of possession; instead, there was about them, as they trooped to a table and sat down, a sulky heaviness. The man glanced at the couple and then at the people at the other tables, with a brief but chastising glare. They seemed to recoil as if into some pool of memory, for their faces suddenly acquired a spreading and knowing glaze. The anniversary man turned and presented to the woman a blush, instead of a rose, in token of some recognition.

‘I don’t like this, Ma,’ the boy said.

‘I too,’ the proprietress said. ‘I don’t like it when all that whispering from outside, comes.’

‘What whispering, Ma?’

‘You’ll see when you grow up,’ she said, looking fearfully at the tables.

‘I see already!’ the boy said, giggling. ‘They playing hide-and-seek!’

Her son’s words didn’t surprise her, only made her guess at the hidden feelings that came like a wash to her customer’s faces.
That re-immersion in recent memory had brought an infectious confidence to the tables. They shone now with the glitter of certainty, some blunt, some sharp, as if in the dimness of some back room. The car-man looked again at the tables, and then looked in front of him as at some invisible onion-paper blueprint. There came from the other tables a whisper, as imperceptible as a muscle straining at the smell of action. The anniversary man soothed his wife, as a midwife would talk to a woman in fruitless labour, cajoling and falsely hopeful. She bared her fleshy lips, not so much in pain as in a pretended forbearance. The Professor, who had appeared at his table with his children almost as a subtext, now leaned forward and roused them into an academic watchfulness.

The car-man snapped his fingers, a marble reflection of the painter, and a waiter hurried to him, but he only shook his head and gestured towards the counter.

'I don't like this, Ma,' the boy said.

'The waiter came and said, 'He wants you.'

She recalled that time he had summoned her, and felt once again the sawing harshness of the eyes round the table.

'You do everything properly?' she said, turning on the waiter.

But that humbled, cringing look on his face only told her that he had just come from the presence of some disturbing power.

'You look after the cash register,' she told the boy, and left the counter.

'You be careful, Ma!' the boy called after her.

She glanced at Ah Seng and Poh Sim as she went past them, and saw that their shining desire had dipped into a dull, bewildered fear.

When she reached the car-man's table and looked at him, she saw something else: she saw the dark whispers she feared so much swim into sharp lines around his lips and the corners of his eyes. And on the faces of the wife and children, it appeared as a smooth assertion of some unshakable right. No scathing appraisal came from around the table, this time: only the falling into place with the sharp clicks of the tongue of some profound indignation.

'You running a proper place?' the man said, looking up at her with eyes that had in them not the shine of the car he drove, but of some chain extending beyond metal and sinking into the flesh of men and women.

'Nobody complain,' she said.

'Nobody complain?' he said. 'You don't see. You don't learn.'

'What to learn?'

'That people are not coming here,' he said.

'Business like that. Sometimes up, sometimes down,' she said.

'Not when you run your business properly.'

'I just a woman.'

'That why you let all kinds of people into this place?'

'What kind of people?'

'All that flesh there,' the man said, thrusting a nod at the couple's table.

'They still people.'

'Still people?' his voice rose, and from the other tables came a clamour like a clash of echoes.
‘Still customers. They pay.’
‘Paying imitations?’ the man said.
‘Behind our back?’ the cracked voice of dignity shouted from another table.

The proprietress turned round and looked at the other tables; faces were
turned in her direction as towards some unimaginable obscenity. The
proprietress was reminded of the newspaper pictures Ah Seng had thrust into
her hands: she saw the gruesome single-eyed, the many-handed, the false-
voiced, the narrow-minded, and the sickly, sun-hidden skins.

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had somehow appeared at her side. The faces turned
towards them, lips twisted by some deeply-rooted self-loathing, eyes blinking
away some ugliness they saw in themselves, and voices raised is some
unforgivable self-vengeance.

‘These people?’ several voices said.

The Professor sat forward, as if to get a fuller grasp of some new text on
social realism. He kept saying to his children, ‘Don’t miss a single detail!’

‘Why you scold this good lady?’ Ah Seng said.
‘She only got affectionate heart,’ Poh Sim said.

The laughter from the tables, when it finally came, didn’t resemble anything
that had been heard in that coffee shop. It crackled like overpowered neon signs,
fell to the floor like faulty crackers, and wheezed about there like damp,
ineffective explosives.

‘Why you laugh at us?’
But the hollow wheezing went on.
‘Flesh is flesh!’ Ah Seng shouted.
But the wheezing wouldn’t stop.
‘You can’t talk to reflections, Ah Seng,’ Poh Sim said above the noise of all
that catharsis.

The proprietress laid a hand on Poh Sim’s shoulder.
‘Go from this shop,’ she said. ‘Take him away. Don’t come back.’

In the silence after their departure, the proprietress turned to the car-man.
‘Shall I take your order, Sir?’
‘You’re learning. At last.’

The proprietress stood behind the counter, looking at the construction
workers and the Stout drinkers, who had returned. The yellow bands of the
evening lay on the street, just outside the shop, and behind them those dark
whispers she would have to be vigilant against. Later in the evening, the car-
man would come; he had promised in his suave, possessive manner, and the
anniversary man had rung up to say he would need a special menu. She sighed.

‘You did right, Ma,’ the boy said at her elbow.
‘Your books say that?’
‘Something else, Ma.’
‘What else did it say?’
‘To be careful of a boy growing too fast!’

Ah Seng and Poh Sim sat at their old, peeling Formica table, drinking
Chinese tea out of chipped mugs.
‘Why the shop lady ask us not to go there anymore?’ Poh Sim said, her flesh spilling all over the stool.
‘Better here forever than there for a short while,’ Ah Seng said.
‘You go to the priest again?’
‘No, I just go to myself.’
‘Reflections?’
‘Yes,’ he said.
‘This nothingness?’
‘Not yet,’ he said, drawing the box filled with the yellow sheets towards him. ‘Must burn them at the family altar.’
‘Our family altar,’ she said, looking at him from inside all that flesh.
ADELINE SIAW-HUI KUEH

The Filmic Representation of Malayan Women: An Analysis of Malayan Films from the 1950s and 1960s

This paper began with my interest in the roles of women in the black and white films of Malaya, spurred on by my own early childhood memories of these films. The female characters left a profound impact on me (regardless of whether they were good or evil) and have remained a source of curiosity. No longer happy with having them function merely as part of my memory, I began watching many of these films again and found remarkably intriguing portrayals of femininity that continue into present-day Malaysian society. With these concerns in mind, my paper will specifically focus on six films from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (or FINAS) film library. They are selected on the basis that they represent, on a micro level, the varying treatments of women, as well as the fact that they are melodramas of the 1950s and '60s with emphasis on female characters. While there are more than a few general overviews on the filmic era written in the Malay language, as well as some extensive papers on contemporary and historical background of the past and present Malaysian film industry, there is very little extensive research done in the area of how the issue of femininity was handled within these films.

I intend to analyse these films around four conceptual categories which I devised as temporary closures for the sake of writing. They are the various manifestations of the Mother Figure, the Woman Warrior, the Gadis/Maiden and the Fallen Woman. The question that matters is not whether these films and categories reveal or distort the reality of women but whether they ‘actively construct … and define’, the ways in which femininity is conceived. It is my opinion that they do reflect, to some extent, the mimetic reality of that period, particularly the historical concerns and turmoil even if these films are of a selected, limited number. In fact, these categories are crucial for the investigation of Malayan films during and after the period of British colonialism.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I. Malayan Film Industry
Historically, the so-called Golden Era of the Malayan film industry stretches from after the Japanese occupation in 1942 into the mid-1960s. The initial filmmaking scene was started by filmmakers from India with the first feature film, *Laila Majnun* in 1933 (with B.S. Rajhans as the director). Before long, two Shaw brothers from Shanghai, China, joined a bandwagon that showed tremendous potential to make money. However, World War II erupted, and the Japanese in Malaya halted all creative productions, which then resumed only when the war ended. This dominance by foreigners continued due to the lack of local expertise (such as technical skills) and financial backing until the early 1970s when some local actors/actresses turned producers/directors.

The involvement and influence of these ‘foreigners’ in the film industry also meant that some of the stories for the films were usually adaptations from Bombay Hindi films or Chinese stories, originally written in a foreign language which had to be translated into Malay.

The popularity of the films was due to the fact that film represented cheap entertainment, the audience being partial to storylines that were based on well-loved classics and the casting of popular *bangsawan* (Malay musical opera) players. Films after the war also had storylines that were usually based on social issues, legends and myths, ancient Indian folklore and also foreign film adaptations. Jamil Sulong, a pioneer local director suggests that ‘regardless of the story, the technique of presentation was still influenced by *bangsawan* which includes singing’, with at least five songs in every film. In other words, the advent of film was an extension of *bangsawan*.

The role of Malay as a *lingua franca* even for the films helped increase the popularity level as well, a factor which sadly enough, is often neglected. The Malay language thus allowed for a broader scope of audience, reflecting the consideration for, and eventual installation of Malay as the national language after independence.

II. Malay Literary Traditions
Within a predominantly oral-based society (at that period in time) and before the filmic media made its appearance, stories and traditions were conveyed originally through word of mouth, particularly by the *penglipurlara* (village story-teller, known also as the worry-dispeller). Through analogies and parables, the social values are thus related to the masses. This was the means by which the villagers received informal and moral education. As such, since the films of that era successfully fulfilled the role of popular entertainment, their visual representations thus ‘replaced’ the verbalisations of the *penglipurlara*. Similarly, the story teller is also invaluable because it is through him that a sense of loyalty (of the masses) to the rulers/nobility is nurtured. The control of language in the folklore by the *penglipurlara* (and the continuation through the filmmakers) ties in with Foucault’s argument that what is ‘true’ depends on
who controls discourse. The power of language, or rather, the power through language is exerted directly and indirectly in civil and domestic life, to constrain and curb the action and speech of the subjects in the community.

The film industry basically tapped into the oral tradition and folk literature, using all types of folktales that are rich in moral values, themes and sayings. For example, with the cerita penglipurlara (folk romance), the main theme in these stories is of travel, love and war, all of which is situated predominantly in a court setting. Another crucial aspect contained within these stories is the concept of amanat (trust or faith) that good will always triumph over evil. The warrior will always fight for justice, a broken promise will have negative consequences, and most importantly, the sense of nilai budi (obligation or graciousness) is underscored, particularly between family members.

Within this context then, folktales (both on- and off-screen) are primarily utilised as a didactic and educational tool to impart concepts of morality. This issue of morality, according to Fatimah Mohd. Yassin, is one that is clearly understood within traditional Malay societies. In fact, certain folktales have profound effects on the moral well-being of the society in general due to the internalisation of these stories told and heard many times over: they fulfil the role of a type of cultural ‘law’. More importantly, the stability of the community in question depends largely on the individual’s co-operation and obligation which ultimately would result in the formation of a unified community. Apart from that, the warrior story genre basically functions to inculcate semangat kebangsaan or national spirit particularly amongst children. Distinctive warriors are set apart from the rest of the masses, to serve as role models.

Fredric Jameson’s argument that cultural practices are ‘ideological signs of contemporary history’ can be elaborated here. Myths and legends in folklore are deployed within a society to achieve a kind of desired social order, and tales are told to promote better adherence to the moral habits and customs of a particular society. Thus, through the socialisation process, children and adults alike are told of stories with stringent binaristic structures of good versus bad: and ghost stories are particularly favoured as the epitome of evil.

What is important to bear in mind is the fact that the embodiments of the folklore and folk literature are transferred and continued in the process of filmmaking, and remain to influence the present-day film industry.

MALAYAN WOMEN IN FILM

Thematically, the most significant construct within Malayan films of the ’50s and ’60s is that of the dichotomous Virtuous versus Fallen woman. This popular theme remains central in the representations of femininity and female sexuality.

The discourse of power and the code of womanly/respectable behaviour based on ‘Victorian’ and Malay morality will be elaborated here. According to Lynda Nead, female sexuality was generally organised around the virgin/whore dichotomy. The notion of respectability was defined for woman in terms of dependency, delicacy and fragility; independence was unnatural, signifying
boldness and sexual deviancy. The term 'fallen woman' basically signifies the 'loss of respectability and purity'. While the idea of having fallen from virtue was historically used in nineteenth-century Europe to connote both the adulteress and the prostitute, I will focus more on the adulteress or specifically, the promiscuous woman as well as the older, evil woman, in the forms of the mother-in-law or the stepmother.

After World War II, Malaya experienced an economy that is marked as a period of growth in urban industrial economy and the increasing demand for independence from the British. In the process of negotiating a sense of identity and coherence, distinctions between good and evil are championed, thereby forming shared notions of morality and respectability. This process of creating primarily a kind of pan-Malay solidarity through Islam, parallels that of the nineteenth-century Victorian England and its Christian ideologies in many ways. Domestic ideology and the production of clearly demarcated gender rules were central features in this process of 'nationalistic' definition. In other words, in the struggle to form a kind of identity or allegiance, Malayan films helped define and regulate female sexuality and other social concerns such as nationalism and religion. Gender became a category within which sexuality could be regulated: with the female being weak, passive and responsive, she is defined through her relationship to the male whose sexual urges were understood to be active, aggressive and spontaneous.

I. National Consciousness and the Mother Figure

An interesting figure in Malay films is the figure of a mother who is central in the making of an individual's identity. The portrayal of the mother figure as the feminine ideal is heightened in contrast to the tragic life (and usually death) of the fallen woman through the sequence of temptation-fall-decline-death. A mother is naturalised to represent all that is good and nurturing, while the seductress/fallen woman is selfish and capable of committing any sin/evil she is inclined to. This concept of the fallen versus the ideal woman is the dominant myth at play in Malayan films.

Another crucial aspect that appears to be the rallying point in the film is the notion of dignity. The mother figure represents the guardian of the home/family which is the building block of society, and she is thus laden with meanings and significations that become a rallying point for nationalistic fervour. The film *Ibu* or 'Mother', made in 1953, reflects the mimetic reality of Malaya prior to its independence. With the mother being at the top of the moral hierarchy within the discourses of many Malayan films, compounded with the concept of the nation being one that is female (*Ibu Pertiwi*), it is not difficult therefore to trace the cinematic notion of motherhood as being the most treasured source of any woman's identity.

Using strong dichotomous female characters, *Ibu* is also suggestive of the appropriate gender behaviour in terms of the realms of public and private place, aside from the fear of the 'breakdown' of the family. Within the context of a pre- and post-independent Malaya whereby the social and political scenarios are
often unstable, it becomes rather clear that this emphasis on proper female
behaviour and the preservation of the family is synonymous with the creation of
a harmonious nation. While the men’s integrity does not come into question, the
fallen woman in this film, like many others, falls into disgrace after having
succumbed to her/their individual nafsu (desire, temptation, greed).

II. Siti Zubaidah the Warrior

The title character Siti Zubaidah as a Warrior articulates the many facets of a
woman’s personality: she challenges the confines of a woman, ventures out of
the safety of a palace, and makes choices in her life. Most courageously, she
teams up with another woman to fight both male and female villains. The
solidarity between these women is admirable. Too many films (Malayan,
Malaysian and otherwise) have shown only the shallow, suspect relationships
between women but neglect the beautiful aspects of female bonding. Siti
Zubaidah and Princess Rukiah rightfully assert their subjectivity and seize upon
the opportunity to restore justice.

The storyline of Siti Zubaidah explicitly incorporates the transgressive act of
resistance which is the fight for independence. Siti Zubaidah manages to
convince the exiled princess, Rukiah, to join forces and fight for the
independence of Rukiah’s country, and to rescue Zubaidah’s husband who is a
prisoner of war in Tartar. The significance of Rukiah’s character being Chinese
is momentous: the very fact that Siti Zubaidah readily teams up with a Chinese
princess to fight for a cause is essentially a rallying cry for the various races in
contemporary Malaya to be united in their fight for independence from the
British.

III. The Azam of the Gadis

Another film that is based on a cerita penglipurlara or folk romance is
Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah, literally ‘White Onion Red Onion’. It
incorporates many elements of magic and foregrounds the Gadis or Maiden
figure. Under the sub-category as cerita nasihat (advice story), it depicts
characteristics that are to be internalised. Merah, while possessing some of the
virtues of being humble and resilient, quietly endures the mistreatments from
her stepfamily, and does not take any actions that are transgressive. Merah’s
‘deliverance’ from her evil stepmother is therefore accomplished through her
goodness and her personal dignity (maruah). This Gadis figure is different from
all other cinematic constructions of Malayan women in terms of the innocence
and the virtue she represents. The word gadis means a girl or a maiden, and it
also signifies virginity.

Incidentally, the issue of social mobility covered in the film is crucial in the
making of a national identity for it emphasises the fact that any subject in
Malaya, with azam or determination, can better oneself. Here, I am proposing
that by acknowledging their humble beginnings, retaining their composure and
dignity, and by learning good (religious) virtues and social graces, the Malays
are presented with a model to elevate themselves in the eyes of others —
particularly in relation to their colonial masters, and other races that are economically at an advantage at this point in time.

IV. The Many Faces of the Fallen Woman

Adulteress

The first construct of the fallen woman, as represented in Semerah Padi (‘As Red As Rice’) and Sumpah Wanita (‘The Curse/Promise of A Woman’), is the adulteress. In both films the female protagonists are adulteresses who succumb to their nafsu or greed, lust, desire. Based on a popular romantic folktale in which an act of betrayal receives its retribution. Sumpah Wanita portrays the woman protagonist as being a fickle being whereas Dara’s ‘fall’ from virtue in Semerah Padi is made possible by the fact that she had come from a respectable family. While Dara is shown to be ‘corrupted’, she is eventually redeemed, after having survived the punishment that is in accordance with Islam. She also caused a reconsideration of the definitions of femininity, respectability and female domesticity. Herein lies the subversiveness of Dara’s character.

Interestingly, one of the questions that arise is how this image of the fallen woman was perpetuated and carried on as historical baggage into our contemporary society. By designating the fallen woman as a victim, rather than as a social threat, promiscuity (like prostitution) as a threat that will destroy the family, the state and the nation is deflected. The use of sympathy/pity was applied so that the fear propagated towards the hegemonic social order might be diffused, and the image of the wretched outcast was formed.

Here, the emphasis is on faith in religion as opposed to positive femininity, and the virtue of a woman is trivialised. This is precisely what Fatimah Yassin states: that in the propagation of certain moral values, some aspects are underscored, while others are neglected.

Mother-in-law

Another feature of the fallen woman construct is demonstrated in the film. Ibu Mertuaku or ‘My Mother-in-Law’. The mother-in-law character is the evil, fallen woman, one who is portrayed as extremely greedy or materialistic. Incidentally, a distancing device has been deployed to attach evil or the fall from grace to someone who is not a ‘true’ blood relation to the family. The appendix ‘in-law’ is stressed: it seems almost convenient that the in-laws become the hosts of evil. The relationship that is formed through marriage is shown to be of a lesser importance or significance to a family unit.

As a critique of the downside of modernity. Ibu Mertuaku reflects how materialistic importance can take over — or in the case of this film, has already corrupted — traditional (read: good) virtues. This perceived threat to traditional values reflects the fear associated with the rapid modernisation in independent Malaysia.

Pontianak

My fascination and curiosity with Malayan films began with the construct of the pontianak, and the ways in which the female ghost is depicted as being
The Filmic Representation of Malayan Women

grotesque. Despite the fact that the original pontianak films (starting in 1957) have been destroyed, I shall still discuss this construct in relation to the concept of the fallen woman that remains pervasive in film, for within Malayan films, the pontianak is the quintessential manifestation of the fallen woman.

Within Malay folk culture, and by extension, Malayan films, there are varying manifestations of women and female sexuality. The most popular is the variation of the infamous pontianak, a ‘gendered monster’, to borrow Barbara Creed’s expression. The pontianak is said to appear sometimes in the form of an owl, but its most common form is that of ‘a beautiful woman who lures men to their doom’. According to Allen Jean:

A woman who had died during or after childbirth becomes a pontianak. She is cursed [by] being denied the promise of peace in the kingdom of God (Allah). She is considered unclean, impure as she cannot fulfil her duty as a mother. The curse of immortality descends on her of having to ‘live’ by draining blood from human hosts and not being able to die with the accorded dignity of proper burial rites.

Published folktales from the Southeast Asia region draw their popularity from the reader’s (and viewer’s) familiarity with local folklore. Folklorist Alan Dundes reports that ‘a goodly portion of folklore is fantasy, collective or collectivised fantasy’. Furthermore, he adds that ‘[f]olktales … like all folklore, have passed the test of time, and are transmitted again and again. Unlike individual dreams, folktales must appeal to the psyches of many, many individuals if they are to survive’.

At this juncture, the psychoanalytic concepts of projection and projective inversion can be applied to the study of folktales in the construct of pontianak, and other ‘fallen women’ in Malayan films. According to Dundes, projection ‘refers to the tendency to attribute to another person or to the environment what is actually within oneself … some internal impulse or feeling which is painful, unacceptable, or taboo’. For example, in the many versions of the pontianak story, the ‘woman’ more often than not, changes from one who is seductive to one who is suddenly monstrous. The sight (and sometimes scent) of a ‘beautiful’ woman succumbs to the ‘evil within’, suggesting that lurking behind every woman is potential evil. Coming across or perhaps serving as a warning, I would suggest that it is indicative of the patriarchal tradition that dominates Malayan folklore and produces negative connotations of female sexuality. Women who overtly exude their sexuality (read: power) cannot be considered ‘good’.

Furthermore, much of the meaning of folkloric fantasy is unconscious, particularly in a Freudian sense, that ‘[a]mong its functions, folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way’. Folktales thus represent the site within which anxieties of the Malayan culture can be vented. Within the narrative of the ghost story, the pontianak becomes the embodiment of female ‘difference’ and that which is despised or repressed within the culture.
Such monstrosity on the part of the woman is therefore created and ‘justified’. For the general folk, the wretchedness and violence that surround the *pontianak* serve again as a warning, primarily to women. In fact, the rituals and practices to purge the body may be seen in terms of the metaphoric projection. They serve as metaphors for processes to uphold the desired ‘purity’ of women in society.

Ultimately, in a patriarchal system, sexual aggression (if sanctioned) is within the exclusive realm of the males: men, not women, are to initiate any interpersonal relationship. However, within a story such as that of the *pontianak*, the designated aggressor is the fallen woman. She almost always, either smiles warmly at the male victim, or she propositions him to visit her again. Here, through the psychoanalytic use of ‘projective inversion’, the men in a sexually repressive society have metamorphosed their own fears of the stereotyped (sexual) woman into a form ‘where the victim becomes the aggressor’. Projective inversion allows one to blame the victim while avoiding the guilt. For the male storyteller (who propagates the ideological discourse) as well as the director of the film, the wish to seduce young women is projected onto the female (or female ghosts) who are depicted as ‘promiscuously’ seducing the males. This strategy makes it possible to blame the *pontianak* (or other fallen woman figures) for the vices the males might want to commit. After all, folktales are about wishful thinking and wish fulfilment and ‘the wisher can through projective inversion, punish in fantasy not himself but the victim of his aggression’. What becomes even more interesting is how, in the end, the aggressor is punished for defying the dominant order. So, within the narrative, the fallen woman who breaks the traditions is punished, symptomatic of the dominant culture incorporating a subculture and neutralising it. The flip-side of the fallen woman is necessarily the ‘good wife’ construct, which in most of the Malayan films, is synonymous with being a good mother.

CONCLUSION

Having delineated the definitions and examples of the fallen women in Malayan films, at this point, what I would like to suggest is that rather than seeing projection in folklore as a mechanical or reductionistic technique, the agency of the reader or viewer should also be considered. An individual who tells or hears a tale cannot help but project his or her own personality into that tale.

One subversive aspect of the fallen woman stories is that women are temporarily allowed to be the ‘aggressors’, behaving unconventionally within a sanctioned space. However, while the women and stories are set within the traditional contexts (and their monstrosity over-emphasised), some of these portrayals are still ground- and myth-breaking within the culture.

As these filmic narratives often reflect the ideology of womanhood that still calls for ‘purity’, Dara’s willingness to die because of her desire for Aduka signifies her subjectivity as a woman, in that she is consciously defying her
arranged marriage to a man of her parents’ choice. This process can be seen in terms of John Fiske’s ‘enunciation’ process, through appropriating ‘the language system by the speaker in a concrete realisation of that part of its potential that suits him or her’ 37 A striking twist is given to a conventional construct of Dara, quintessential fallen woman who has committed adultery in Semerah Padi. Yet, the audience is presented with Dara’s own alternative view of the reasons/rationale behind her actions, and she is framed within a more forgiving, empathetic light. Dara’s enunciation process here is indubitably one of the most salient features in the film, as well as in all Malayan films. In terms of female subjectivity, its subversiveness is also due to a kind of cinematic textual resistance within the dominant discourse of its time.

The celebratory empowerment 38 can also manifest in the ‘liberating’ strategies and readings within the collection of fallen woman stories. One of the strategies is to subvert the conventional formula which sets up the expectation. Dara and Aduka’s happy ending represents a space within which the ‘routine’ of a story is overturned.

In some of these filmic texts, considering the conditioned expectation within the reader/viewer of a ghost story, there exists an awareness or knowledge that the male will be punished by the female (ghost or otherwise) for his advances. Their machismo/chauvinistic approach towards ‘young ladies’ is interestingly exposed to be very naive and finally even detrimental to the men’s health, since they usually succumb to the female ‘seductress’. Herein lies an aspect of the ‘subversive pleasure of the female spectator/reader’. 39 I am therefore suggesting that pleasure comes from seeing the woman exact revenge and in seeing the supposedly I-know-best male being tricked. This aspect may seem to be the main element which allows for a site of fantasy for the female reader or viewer, and thereby results in the continuation of the fallen women myths within a society (at least for some of the female spectators).

Having said this, while these films according to Hamzah Hussein were essentially ‘made for women’, with the female audience in mind, 40 such films were utilised as a didactic tool, to convey the proper or ideal womanhood. A distinction should therefore be made here to indicate that ‘ideal womanhood’ and ‘films for women’ are by no means positive with regard to female subjectivity.

When we consider the various representations in these films, we can observe some conspicuous assumptions at work: the fall of these women suggests firstly, a lack of intelligent choice perhaps, that they succumb to nafsu, or temptations/greed; and secondly, what Nead terms a ‘woman’s innate weakness’. 41 This assumption ties in with the woman’s ‘lack’ of discipline, which is thereby made more obvious in comparison to the martyrdom of a mother figure.

The role of the ideal woman as embodied by the mother figure is also intrinsically linked to the formation of a national consciousness. As a focal point in the concept of a nuclear family, the mother figure upholds — and becomes the site of — the desired social virtues. This lopsided emphasis on the
martyr/mother is deemed necessary at a historical point in time when Malayan independence is an issue, for she controls the domestic domain: the location from which the individual's identity is moulded. While Ibu nurtures familial concerns that contribute towards national consciousness, these nationalistic sentiments are also articulated in Siti Zubaidah.

The sexual division of the private and public domain is also made obvious within these texts. The good wives and mothers are situated within the private domain, whereas the men can freely roam the street with invisibility and ease, echoing the construct of the 'transcendental' Bourgeois male within the public domain. Again, the women who transgress these boundaries are deemed of low virtue.

According to Stallybrass and White, despite the gradations along the continuum of hierarchy, systems of extremes (high and low cultures) are favoured in framing all discursive elaborations. In terms of such systems of extremes, all six of the films — with the exception of Siti Zubaidah to a large extent — deal with the construction of gender in terms of the appropriateness of male/female behaviour.

While folklore has preset rules, filmmakers can redefine them. Yet, in most portrayals of women in Malayan films, these gendered identities are retained. Except for Dara in Semerah Padi, in the process of delineating the didactics of good and bad, the women characters in Ibu, Ibu Mertuaku, Bawang Pupeh Bawang Merah, and Sumpah Wanita are reduced to pitiful objects. While the character of Merah may serve as a model to some (in terms of her virtues), she — like the many other female representations in Malayan films — is still contained within a gendered discourse.

NOTES

2. I must firstly say that Malaya as a geopolitical entity no longer exists, although until 1965 Malaya (which became the Federation of Malaysia in 1957) consisted of the Peninsula Malaysia, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.
4. Some of the local actors/actresses decided that with their established popularity as film stars, as well as with their experience, they should do just as well as directors and/or producers. There was also an organisation that fought for the rights of the workers and actors in the filmmaking industry. In 1954, Persatuan Artiste Malaya
(PERSAMA) was formed, under the wings of the Labour Union, to ensure better working conditions at the studios.


It should be noted that foreign film adaptations played a significant part in the early Malayan film industry. Many film directors were known for their successful adaptations, such as P. Ramlee and his Ibu Mertuaku (1962) which won him ‘The Most Versatile Talent’ in the 10th Asian Film Fest in Tokyo, 1963.

Abdul Razak’s Language Committee (1956) strived to push for the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia to be made the national language. Tun Abdul Razak was then the Education Minister but later became the third Prime Minister of Malaysia. He died in office in 1976. In fact, the screening of the original Pontianak was expected to last for only two days at a major Cathay cinema, but the film proved to be so popular (among all the races in Malaya) that it went on for two months. Its success made it the most popular film in the history of Malayan filmmaking (Hamzah Hussein, December 17, 1995).


What I am arguing is that there were attempts at securing an identity that is based on a critique of the nobility, as well as the lower classes. In these scenarios, the royal court traditions and folktales presented the ‘cultural producers’ with sites within which the contrasting noble virtues and decadence of the royalty are exposed. Similarly, the lower classes, with their humility are championed while their nafsulgreed is shunned.

The secondary concern then is to create a shared allegiance with all other races, in the face of the colonialists. In most cases, this issue was a by-product.

Hamid, op. cit., p. 33. Usually the sinner legend is about a single child who abandons/foresakes his parents and then gets turned to stone (as in Cerita Si Tenggang), so as to deter young children from going against their parents.
24 Mohd. Yassin, op. cit., p. 163.
28 Alan Dundes, Interpreting Folklore (Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1980), p. 34.
29 Ibid., p. 37.
31 Dundes, op. cit., p. 36.
32 Ibid., p. 54.
33 Ibid., p. 51.
34 Ibid., p. 54.
35 This is not the case in Siti Zubaidah, which is why it is striking. See last section of this work for a detailed analysis.
36 Dundes, op. cit., p. 59.
38 Grossberg, op. cit., p. 177.
41 Nead, op. cit., p. 78.

Films Cited
Charlene Rajendran

SO MUSH OF ME

So *mush* of me is English.
My dreaded colonial heritage.
From Enid Blyton to Beatrix Potter
my idylls lie distant in Yorkshire.

So *mush* of me lives Anglo.
My dreaded white inheritance.
From Laura Ashley to Marks & Spencer
my istanas all built in Windsor.

So, *mush* of me
misplaced.
Really I am Malaysian,
Ceylonese, Tamil,
Anglophile, All.
Mingled by history
not choice.

So, *mush* of me
misfit.
My outfits all merge
and combine.
From kurungs of kashmere
to kain batik ballgowns,
my palate eats roast beef
with rice.
PHILIP HOLDEN

Complicity and Resistance: English Studies and Cultural Capital in Colonial Singapore

In his recent memoirs, former Singapore Primer Minister Lee Kuan Yew notes a surprising connection between himself and other leaders of newly independent Commonwealth states in the 1960s. Recalling his studies at Raffles Institution, the colony’s premier Anglophone secondary school, and his sitting for the Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge School Certificates. Lee notes that he was following a syllabus taught throughout the Empire. ‘Many years later, whenever I met Commonwealth leaders from far-flung islands in the Caribbean or the Pacific. I discovered that they had gone through the same drill with the same textbooks and could quote the same passages from Shakespeare’.¹ The institution of English Studies in former British colonies has often been studied with reference to the projection of colonial power. Lee’s testimony hints that it may also be readily analysed to explore occluded continuities between colonial and post-independence states, thereby providing a certain discursive leverage on national narratives of modernity and development.

THEORISING COLONIAL ENGLISH STUDIES

Much analysis of colonial English studies, notably Gauri Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest*, has seen the discipline through a Gramscian lens as a means of maintaining ‘Western cultural hegemony’ through ‘the creation of a blueprint for social control in the guise of a humanistic program of enlightenment’.² While Viswanathan’s work has been useful in opening up an area of debate, its Gramscian framework tends to devalue the admittedly compromised agency shown by colonial subjects in using the legacies of English studies, and tends to stress textual over material practices. In my work on Straits Chinese participation in the reform movement in colonial Singapore, I have found the work of Pierre Bourdieu useful. Education systems, Bourdieu and Passeron argue, do not merely inculcate linguistic competence: they also transmit certain modes of behaviour and social competences which privilege some students over others. Cultural capital is produced, consisting of ‘the cultural goods transmitted by the ... [pedagogic actions]’³ which enable ‘social reproduction, by enabling the possessors of the prerequisite cultural capital to continue to monopolise that capital’.⁴ Bourdieu is here concerned with class, but his concepts might readily
be applied to the production of Anglophone colonial elites in British colonies. Cultural capital seems potentially more productive than, for instance, Althusser’s notion of interpellation, precisely because it preserves a notion of compromised agency. Given colonialism’s constitutive contradictions, there were many opportunities for members of the colonial elites to put cultural capital to various uses — some resisting, others compliant — within the market of the colonial public sphere. It is thus possible to speak of an agency in resistance here, while being fully aware of the limitations upon this agency.

Related to the accumulation of cultural capital is Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus, the manner in which each subject lives out his or her life through a series of repetitive actions and choices which are nonetheless governed by certain parameters, a sort of art of living. Produced by both ‘the material conditions of life, and ... pedagogic action’, the habitus would thus include actions as various as the choice of clothes one makes, one’s use of different languages, and different registers of languages in different social settings, and one’s choice of a form of regular physical exercise. Using the notion of the habitus in the study of colonial elites grounds one in material practices and events, such as the choice of colonial newspapers by a reader, or the decision to adopt Western, or a revised interpretation of traditional dress. Furthermore, concentration on the habitus pulls analysis towards material practices rather than away from them, as the investigation of ‘subjectivity’ encouraged by narrowly Foucauldian or psychoanalytic approaches tends to do. Discussion of English studies in a colonial context, for instance, is often accompanied by suggestions about physical discipline and training of the body, and the inculcation of ‘character’ and ‘taste’ in colonial subjects: Bourdieu’s conceptual framework allows us to see the connection between these apparently disparate elements, and to integrate discussion of them.

THE CAMBRIDGE CERTIFICATE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

In Singapore, education in English became of increasing concern to the colonial authorities in the late nineteenth century. Students who remained at school after Standard Six were mostly entered for the University of Cambridge Junior and Higher local examinations, which were administered in Singapore from 1891 onwards. While the number of students sitting the examinations was small, it was from this group that the English-speaking elite able to act within the colonial public sphere would be drawn. Success in the Cambridge Higher, or in a separate, competitive examination, might result in the award of a Queen’s Scholarship to study at a British university. Both Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, prominent members of the Straits Chinese community at the turn of the century, won scholarships and furthered their studies in the United Kingdom before returning to Singapore.

English studies formed a central part of the Cambridge syllabus. At the junior level, papers were offered in English Composition, English Grammar, and on individual works of literature, mostly Shakespeare plays. The Higher examination featured papers in both English Language and Literature and in the
History of English Literature: favoured authors included Shakespeare, Milton, Burke, Byron and Scott.

There was considerable dissatisfaction in Singapore regarding the Cambridge syllabus's bias towards a metropolitan audience. In the 1902 Kynnersley Report several committee members, including Lim, then the Legislative Council member with responsibility for education, criticised the Anglocentrism of the English studies element of the Cambridge exams:

As might be expected this subject is studied from the point of view of a pupil to whom it is the mother tongue. In preparing for it, attention must be paid to the history of the language, rather than to the acquisition of a working knowledge of modern English, and of the alternative subjects of literature set for study in the present Syllabus none is later than Addison's Spectator.

Cambridge papers from 1905 onwards appear to take criticisms such as these into account. There are more recent, although no contemporary authors, and some of the composition questions are more consciously directed towards a potential colonial examinee. Locally-targeted examinations, however, were not introduced for another ten years, and today Singapore students still sit their descendants, University of Cambridge ‘O’ and ‘A’ level papers, over a decade after the former have been superseded in United Kingdom.

English studies stressed both the study of grammar and an intimate knowledge of English and Imperial culture. A randomly selected question from a junior examination demonstrates this:

Correct the following sentences, giving reasons for the alterations which you make:
  a) Japan has one of the best armies and natives in the world.
  b) Neither team won the cup, and probably did not do themselves justice.
  c) Hannibal devoted himself to the ruin of Rome, and it is well within the bounds of possibility that he would have done so, if he had received proper reinforcements.
  d) The Maoris are of copper-brown colour, and not black like the ordinary negro is.

An imperial subject is called into being through this paper, one who is concerned about the projection of imperial power and historical precedents, and who subscribes both to a hierarchy of races and to a code of late-Victorian manliness encouraged by team games. The English language, many commentators in colonial Singapore felt, would provide a means of improving the character of students, of making them modern colonial subjects. The Kynnersley report thus encouraged schools to mark out playgrounds which 'would be of immense benefit to the boys physically, morally, and also as a direct aid to the teaching of the English language and of English habits of thought'. Since the terminology used in team games played on the playground was mostly English, the report's authors noted, 'the bigger boys would certainly be encouraged to speak English, they would acquire a more manly and less selfish habit of thought, and their health and physique would be greatly improved'. It is clear here that the use of English is part of a larger colonial habitus, which colonial elites are to be encouraged, to a degree at least, to acquire.
The study of English Literature in preparation for the Cambridge examinations would have involved a similar process of interpellation as an imperial subject which we might also read, through Bourdieu, as an accumulation of cultural capital. English Literature was studied in parallel with English history, and as the climax of a cultural narrative which began in Classical Greece and Rome. Examinees were thus encouraged to decode Classical allusions and historical references in Shakespeare and Milton. They needed not only intimate knowledge of individual texts, but also an appreciation of the literary and historical environment in which such texts were produced, an environment seen through a sharply-focused lens. Works of literature were repeatedly presented in such a manner as to inculcate ‘taste’ and ‘character’. The Higher examination for English Language and Literature sat on June 18, 1901, for instance, asked students to ‘[d]istinguish those features of the Faerie Queene which are characteristic only of the literary taste of Spenser’s day from those which have influenced later English Poetry’, and to evaluate Spenser’s powers of observation of character. The June 17 1896 Higher English Language and Literature paper asked students to explain how selected passages of *Julius Caesar* illustrated ‘the character of the speaker’ and to comment on Shakespeare’s ‘use of the storm in Act I as a text of character’.

The recurrence of the words ‘taste’ and ‘character’ might alert us to what is happening in a student’s preparation for the examinations. Through accumulating the linguistic and cultural capital inculcated by English Studies, the student would reach ‘the accomplished form of the habitus, i.e. the degree of cultural attainment by which a group or class recognises the accomplished man’. Bourdieu’s terminology is more useful than Gramsci’s or Althusser’s here because it recognises the agency of colonial subjects. The Cambridge Examinations were not primarily designed for non-European colonial subjects such as Lim and Song, but rather to ensure the transmission of cultural capital within metropolitan and colonial European communities. The cultural capital which Singaporean students acquired might be put to uses other than those intended by the colonial administration. Lim and Song could not control the market in which the capital was distributed, and both remained deeply reliant upon late-Victorian ascetic masculine habitus — in this sense they were interpellated as colonial subjects — but they could control individual distributions of that capital.

**RESISTANCE AND COMPLICITY: THE ECONOMY OF COLONIAL CULTURAL CAPITAL**

As Anglophone elites emerged in Singapore, so did their demands for equality in the colonial public sphere. Debates concerning the rights of colonial subjects to equal participation in the public sphere were thus often phrased as, or often eventually became, struggles over the use of the English language. A reader could, for instance, tell a newspaper’s politics from whether it used the prefixes ‘Mr’ and ‘Mrs’ when writing of non-Europeans. The *Straits Times*, which the *Straits Eurasian Advocate* described in its opening editorial as an
‘organ of the ruling race’ did not. The Straits Echo, printed in Penang but available in Singapore, and managed by Lim Seng Hong, declared in its first issue its intention to ‘indicate the points of reasonable difference of opinion (from that of the Straits Settlements government) and to encourage a tone of independent judgment upon local as well as Imperial affairs’; it demonstrated this by according non-European men the title ‘Mr’.

An example of how struggles to speak by non-European elites in the public sphere became inexorably associated with the use of the English language is shown in the ‘Lady Baby Broker’ court case of 1903. As the Straits Times reported, a woman called Mrs. B. Waddell, ‘English born, of Saigon’ advertised a baby for adoption by a ‘wealthy person (of any nationality)’. Later she sent in advertisements for other babies for sale. The newspaper informed the police, who arranged a trap in which a Chinese detective posed as a likely buyer — the ‘babies’ were then revealed to be teenage girls sold into prostitution. Mrs. Waddell and two Japanese nationals were charged under the Women’s and Children’s Protection Ordinance with attempting to procure a girl under the age of sixteen for immoral purposes. In a move which the Straits Chinese Magazine felt was significant, Mrs. Waddell’s bail was set at $200, while the Japanese nationals were charged $500. Predictably, Mrs. Waddell jumped bail and left Singapore, thereby relieving the colonial authorities of the embarrassment of a trial which raised questions about any putative European moral superiority.

In its coverage, the Straits Times attempted to deflect attention away from Mrs. Waddell herself to other communities. The babies, the paper noted, were most likely sold ‘to Chinamen for unmentionable purposes’. Through the medium of The Straits Chinese Magazine, Lim and Song hit back strongly, an unsigned editorial noting that selling children was ‘an offence which, in my humble opinion, totally eclipsed the enormity of the crime of infanticide so commonly laid at the door of the Chinese’. Yet the editorial also made substantial use of cultural capital. Mrs. Waddell was referred to as a lady, it noted, but had behaved in a distinctly unladylike manner:

> It is a matter much to be regretted that the lady in question was English, for if she had been a Chinese or Indian woman, or indeed had she belonged to any of the other coloured races, the public would have been treated to more lengthy and nauseating accounts of a hideous crime, which is gratuitously and magnanimously conceded to be the peculiar and exclusive property of Eastern races generally and the Chinese nation in particular.

Lim and Song’s cultural capital here enables them to prise apart the moral category of ‘lady’ from the racial category of ‘European’, thereby undoing a connection which the colonial authorities worked assiduously to promote.

The ramifications of the case, however, did not stop with the response of the Straits Chinese Magazine. In its original coverage, the Straits Times noted that Mrs. Waddell had apparently stayed with an ‘Arab gentleman’ during her time in Singapore. Two members of the Arab community, one of whom was M. Idid, Secretary of the Arab Club, wrote to the newspaper protesting that the man was not, in fact, Arab. The Straits Times, despite apparently admitting the mistake in
correspondence, refused to publish the letters or a correction. The two men then turned to the *Straits Echo*, which printed the letters in order 'to give every man the chance to defend himself when assailed either in a direct or indirect manner'. Grudgingly, the *Straits Times* finally agreed to publish the letters. In an editorial, however, it made deprecating comments about their use of English, noting that '[w]e do not pretend to be able to scan the first half of the above notice'. If the arguments of colonial subjects for their rights to speak were unanswerable, their speech itself might be discredited through the use of the techniques of English studies.

If the *Straits Times* used grammar and parsing, elaborately learned through English Studies, as a method of disqualifying non-European speech, the same tools might also be used by those claiming a right to speak in the Anglophone public sphere. While colonial civil service officers in the Straits settlements and Malaya from the 1880s onwards tended to have a university or public school background, many Europeans lower down in the hierarchy were much less well educated. Police inspectors were a particular anomaly: police work involved the highly visible imposition of the colonial government's power, and an obvious hierarchy. An informal bar upon non-Europeans serving as police inspectors existed until 1904, when it was formalised. Non-Europeans were not promoted to such positions in the Federated Malay States until the 1920s. Economic necessity, however, meant that the inspectors could not be recruited as part of the cadet service: rather, they were either selected locally from non-commissioned officers in army units, or hired from British police forces. Their education level was thus substantially below that of a number of their non-European subordinates, and this made them a ready target for critique.

The *Straits Eurasian Advocate* agitated for Eurasian police officers, noting the disparity between the European inspectors' physical and intellectual training:

Physically speaking, they are a fine class of fellows — stalwart, brawny, strong in limbs, and capable of undergoing an amount of fatigue which the average Kling or Malay policeman is unable to undergo — that is all. In intellectual attainment they are nowhere.... [M]ost of the men elevated to Inspectorships within the past few years are entirely unsuited to such posts from an intellectual point of view, and in our opinion, these appointments are the outcome of favouritism.

One of the paper's correspondents, only signing himself 'An Eurasian', was more direct in his attack. Rather than merely criticise educational deficiencies, he gave examples of error-ridden letters sent by Englishmen in positions of authority who had 'had the advantage of all the Board Schools in England'. 'The Queen's English,' he noted, 'is not murdered by Eurasians alone. People who live in glass houses should be careful how they throw stones'.

Ability in grammar and spelling were useful elements of cultural capital which could be utilised to good effect in the colonial public sphere: proficiency in writing literature was another, and perhaps more potent, means of interlocution. Lim and Song's *Straits Chinese Magazine* published a substantial
number of stories written in English, largely, but not exclusively, by Straits Chinese authors. It would be a mistake to think of all the stories as writing back to colonialism — many were concerned with manufacturing or consolidating a ‘Straits-born’ identity through the retrieval of Chinese or Peranakan myths and stories, and their translation into English. Several, however, used their authors’ obvious familiarity with English literary conventions to again point out the contradictions of colonial rule, and to demand a right to speak and to be heard.

Wee Tong Poh’s ‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ is an example, and it again takes a manifestly incompetent police inspector as its target, comparing him unfavourably with the protagonist, an affluent Straits Chinese doctor. The doctor, presenting the story in first person, recalls being called upon to attend to a ‘towkay’s wife’ on her deathbed. He somewhat callously informs her that ‘I could hold out no hope of her recovery’, and the woman then asks to make a confession to him. She wishes, she informs him, to confess that she has framed another woman in a case involving the illegal chap-ji-ki lottery, an action which has resulted in the woman being jailed. She wishes to confess to the police inspector in the presence of the doctor, in order that her words not be mistranslated by the Teochew informer who accompanies the inspector, and who also has a financial interest in the case. The ironically-named Inspector Catspaw arrives to transcribe the confession: this is effected after considerable humour at his expense. The story then switches genres, and concludes as a ghost story. At the moment of death, the towkay’s wife has a vision of being strangled by the woman she unjustly sent to prison, who has just died. The following day, the doctor receives a note that the innocent woman in jail ‘had starved herself to death and ... her soul had departed from its earthly frame just about the time when my late patient was making her confession in her house in Mitchell Terrace’.

‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ is structured around a comparison between the Straits Chinese doctor and European inspector. This comparison in itself is a staple of late nineteenth-century detective fiction. Arthur Conan Doyle was a doctor, and several commentators have noted that both the inspector’s and the doctor’s gaze are part of a Foucauldian disciplinary culture in the late nineteenth century, both associated with the ‘ideology of examination and the gaze of science’. Wee Tong Poh’s Straits Chinese doctor, in this reading, removes the European from the centre of the panopticon. Linguistic ability and cultural knowledge enable the doctor to conform more closely to the ideal late nineteenth-century masculine habitus, to enter into every corner of life, to survey it, and to classify it, while still retaining a position of disinterest.

The detective story, D.A. Miller reminds us, however, did not merely celebrate totalising surveillance in the late nineteenth century. In its identification and pinning down of crime, paradoxically, the detective story produced a sense of freedom in its readers, an ideological illusion of the remainder of ‘everyday life as fundamentally “outside” the network of policing power’.31
It is often argued that the detective story seeks to totalise its signifiers in a complete and all-encompassing order. On the contrary, it is concerned to restrict and localise the province of meaning: to guarantee large areas of irrelevance. For as the fantasy of total relevance yields to the reality of a more selective meaningfulness, the universality of suspicion gives way to a highly specific guilt. Engaged in producing a social innocence, the detective story might well take for the motto of its enterprise, ‘The truth shall make you free’. What is surely significant about Wee’s story is that it resists the closure of the detective novel through a transformation of genres. Rather than focusing upon highly specific guilt, its conclusion rather suggests cosmic forces of retribution outside the rational order which the detective story promotes. These forces, again surely significantly, come from a vital oral culture: they have their source in a spiritual domain away from the public sphere which Catspaw and the agents of colonial jurisprudence cannot penetrate.

If ‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ illustrates the possible uses of the cultural capital acquired through English Studies to undermine colonial authority, the story equally precisely indicates the complicity involved in such a transaction. In order to create, in the figure of the Straits Chinese doctor, an ideal expression of a fin-de-siècle masculine habitus, Wee must create a category of others, those colonial subjects who cannot be admitted into the public sphere. Hence, far more than Catspaw, it is the informant who accompanies him who is subject to the narrator’s critical gaze:

Following close at his heels, came one of those objectionable individuals who, under the name of informers, make a living out of the fees imposed by the Police Magistrates on gamblers against whom they have information. He was a Teochew Chinaman, with a cunning and crafty look in his eyes and dressed with bad taste. I loathed at [sic] the very sight of the man.

Much here — including the implicit comparison with a dog — is drawn from the similarly racist depictions of Chinese characters in the writings of colonial officials, notably Hugh Clifford. To these Wee adds a special emphasis on a middle-class colonial elite habitus, on the accoutrements of gracious, middle-class living. His doctor has just smoked a cigar: he now cannot help noting the informant’s want of dress sense. The roles are also rather unsubtly gendered. The innocent, Christian Chinese woman is sacrificed in prison, while the urbane Straits Chinese professional man demonstrates his competence to enter the public sphere.

If this story, and the other interventions discussed, do point out the contradictions of colonialism, twisting a knife, as it were, into the cracks between overlapping discursive formations, they do so at a certain price. The price is the creation of a respectable Chinese or Eurasian subjectivity, one modelled on the late nineteenth-century English masculine habitus, in which public is divided from private, masculine from feminine, and work from leisure.
CONCLUSION — BOURGEOIS ASIAN MODERNITY

What is most interesting in the interventions discussed above is the manner in which they re-constellate Asianness. The *Straits Chinese Magazine*, we see, creates a bourgeois Asian subject differentiated both from the decadence of the colonial regime and the boorishness of the masses. In other writings, Lim stressed a reformed Confucianism rephrased as the only legitimate heir of Enlightenment rationality. Lim, of course, was influenced by many sources, including the reform movement in late Qing China, whose world view, Prasenjit Duara has noted, "may be the most proximate ancestor of the phenomenon called "Confucian capitalism" in the Pacific Rim today". The particular manifestation of that capitalism in Singapore, however, marked by a commitment to 'Shared Values' (a work ethic which Max Weber would have found familiar), a faith in rationality placed in 'Good English' as the language of technology, and a commitment to literature and the arts as a means of encouraging a 'gracious society', bears clear traces of cultural capital acquired under colonialism, and now re-invested, put to a different — and yet not so very different — use.

NOTES

7. For instance, the December 12, 1906 English Composition paper gives examinees the choice of writing an essay, among other topics, on 'Any one of the English counties or of the British colonies'. All quotations are taken from examination paper copies provided by the Archivist, University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, Cambridge, U.K.
13. Bourdieu and Passeron. p. 34.
Straits Settlements Civil Service recruits took a competitive examination before 1882, but they had to be nominated for it by the Secretary of State. In 1882 the Colonial Office began open competitive examinations for the 'Eastern Cadetships' (Straits Settlements, Ceylon, and Hong Kong) See John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 41.

Butcher, p. 108.

Butcher, p. 47.

Eurasians as Policemen*, Straits Eurasian Advocate, February 4 1888, pp. 2–3.


Miller, p. 34.

Wee, p. 100.

See, for example, Hugh Clifford’s ‘His Little Bill’ in the collection *Studies in Brown Humanity*. Describing a murder committed by a Chinese man in Pahang Clifford’s narrator notes that ‘[a]s we get lower down the scale of humanity, the more difficult it becomes to appreciate the attitude of mind of a man who is impelled to do all manner of strange and inconsequent things for reasons which to us are at once obscure and unreasonable’. Hugh Clifford, *Studies in Brown Humanity* (London: Richards, 1927), p. 54. The Chinese labourer, Clifford’s narrator insists, ‘is intellectually as debased a type of man as any in existence’ and ‘one of the lowest specimens of our human stock’ (p. 55). Clifford’s racism did not go unchallenged: *The Straits Chinese Magazine* editorialised against the anti-Chinese content of two of his collections of stories, noting his ignorance of Chinese culture, and the fact that such fiction was unlikely to contribute to inter-racial harmony.

In 1979, indeed, Lee spoke to civil servants at the Regional English Language Centre, and promoted the study of English as a 'discipline', in which ideas might be properly 'thought out and dressed in clean, clear prose'. Both government courtesy campaigns and visions promoting the place of the arts in society have frequently used the words 'gracious' and 'cultured', often bearing the traces of the kind of habitus idealised by English studies. See Lee Kuan Yew, 'Clean, Clear Prose', in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, eds. Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan (Singapore Times, 1998), pp. 393–95.
Chester
Chester had expected a little girl, but Suyin is already taller than her mother Li Ann. Perhaps that isn't surprising, as his parents are tall, and he had been one of the tallest boys in his high school.

He had thought she would have been immediately recognizable, like his sister would have been had she survived her infancy. Fair and pink, gold-red hair, straight high nose, and finely etched lips. 'A rosebud,' Mother had said to a visiting neighbour a long time ago, when he was about five.

He had never forgotten the word, because Mother hardly ever spoke about her, and the doubled sound, 'rosebud,' lingered as a mysterious effect — he had not known what a rosebud looked like when he first heard her say it — then took on the folded shape of a pink flower when he accompanied her to a florist a few months later and the woman at the shop had asked, 'Do you want some roses?'

His mother had replied, 'Oh, aren't they the sweetest rosebuds?' gesturing to the leafless stems from which single creased heads of infant roses sprang. But she bought the spicy scented freesias instead, burying her nose among the blooms hanging like orange bells from stalks just bursting out of spring bulbs.

Closed-in, meshed petals, crimson bleeding into black, dark red rosebuds were his wife's, Meryl's, favourite flowers, and each time she carried some home from the First Avenue Chilean florist, he felt a pang, as at the moment of the first sounding of the word, for what had stood between him and single childhood, not even a remembered ghost of a sister but an image of a flower.

A vague disappointment stirs at this memory.

'Suyin.' The child announces herself prosaically. Her colour is all Asian: brown and ochre mixed, like a tropical clay, no leaden grey or gravely chalk. She is sun-coloured brown, pecan-shelled, and her hair is dark, Chinese-same, in the low-lit cafe. He sees she needs braces; her large teeth crowding in a small mouth, will need expensive orthodontic repair to straighten the haphazard angles.

Her eyes do not meet his. He finds them small at first, but once she gazes at him fully he sees they are round, with broad whites and shiny green hazel irises the colour of his.

The pulse in his chest hurts like a tick after too much exercise. He has not felt so much hurt even after the last argument with Meryl, only this time the hurt is with himself.
Through the cafe noise he says things about the food, about his English-language-use research: it is like talking above the engines of planes landing on runways on every side. A roar inside his body echoes outside with the bass voices of the white men in the cafe. He hears a French accent, Californian, tones like German or Norwegian, lots of British, flat and broad vowels, all speaking English — and the high-pitched nervy jingly paces of the women, ‘Yes, lah, so Susan say what for. true-loh. my boss don’t give me day off, my mother like chocolate. meh. we buy Col’ Storage.’

Chester watches her scoop the ice-cream. shiny cream dripping off the small bowl of the spoon. She is a dainty eater and takes a long time finishing it.

By then he is talking recklessly, not understanding why he is asking if she would be interested in a visit to New York. He will have to call Meryl if Suyin accepts. For once he does not know what Meryl will say. His plans are changing even now.

He had not wanted to change on returning to New York twelve years ago. The Peace Corps year in Malaysia was finally over, like a too long movie, fascinating in the first few hours, dreadful with smoke and blood in its conclusion. He had wanted reality, the bland clean shampooed middle-class reality of his students. The reality of his parents’ life that bright energetic Meryl promised. No puddles of darkness, no dark skins, no nasal curses, no sharp unidentifiable smells. Vanilla ice-cream.

He strokes his thighs thinking of Meryl.

The noise in his head subsides. He can pay the waiter without fumbling for change.

‘Auntie Ellen is waiting outside,’ Suyin tells him.

He shakes Ellen’s unfriendly hand. In the white-hot sunshine he sees red-gold hairs shining on Suyin’s arms, and her black hair gleams with auburn streaks.

He knows it is shame he is feeling, shame which is like a different kind of love, the first time he has loved so shamefully, as he watches his daughter walk away.

Li Ann

It was my idea to have a family vacation.

‘Yuck! With Auntie Ellen and Grandma Yeh! I don’t want to go!’

Suyin used to be a quiet child. I was worried that she never talked to me about school or her friends. ‘I don’t have any!’ she said when I asked her last year, although I knew it wasn’t true. Her teacher had reported she was a popular student. Now she’d become loud and assertive. I almost wished she hadn’t changed.

‘What do I call Chester?’ she had asked me the first time he was taking her alone to a movie.

‘Call him “Chester”.’ I knew she was asking me a different kind of question. Like I had let my husband Henry discover Suyin for himself, I let Suyin discover Chester. If she had asked me directly I would have told her.
Perhaps I am more Chinese than I know. Writing about stocks and shares is easy. It is all that murky everyday stuff — relationships, feelings, what’s there and not there, love, guilt — that I leave unspoken.

I didn’t ask Suyin what she and Chester talked about, what they did, what she thought about finding her father at the age of eleven. Let Chester carry the weight of their relationship!

All right, Port Dickson is not everyone’s idea of a holiday, but it is nicer than St. John’s Island, and we can all go without much fuss, because none of us have given up our Malaysian passports.

‘I’ll get around to it,’ I told Sonny Ang when he pushed for me to change to a Singapore national. National identity is the kind of information that seems important when exchange securities are discussed, he said, and the shareholders are concerned about where my loyalties are as editor of BioSyn-Sign.

‘Aren’t you still an Australian citizen?’ I asked.

‘Catty, catty!’ he mocked. ‘But Australian has more cachet than Malaysian, you know.’ Sonny never worries about being superior. He simply enjoys the condition. He’s good with the Board of Directors. He knows their every social-climbing impulse and beats them at it.

Most Friday nights Sonny comes by the office in a tuxedo with a red or white cummerband, his hair slicked down with perfumed pompadour, on his way to some charity function or art-gallery opening. Bi-Syn’s own mambo-band-leader, I tease him. He likes boys more than women, some kinds of women more than others, but that is the kind of information that doesn’t count on the balance-sheets.

‘Lay your sleeping head, my love, human on my faithless arm.’ None of the British lecturers at the University of Malaya had told us about W. H. Auden and his Chester when we were studying Contemporary Poetry, and all that time I believed Auden was writing about men and women. For a long time I thought faithless Auden was speaking to me, that Chester and Auden were one male voice, one male body, betraying my desire. Then when I read Auden’s letters to Chester I was confused. It may have been the first time I saw how I had betrayed Henry, whom I had never loved. I had believed love and faithfulness to be the same. Without love, how could I have been unfaithful to my husband?

But in Malaysia it is husbands, not lovers, who are open to betrayal. And Chester, that name I had found so profoundly and remotely American? Like me, Auden had also loved a Chester. Now I imagine his Chester to be a small nervous envious alcoholic to whom Auden had addressed some of the most moving lines in the English language. Auden and Chester were lovers. My Chester was only a passing body. Or I was only a passing body to him, a handgrip, a spasm, an unmemorable memory. If I had not read Auden’s poetry, perhaps that was all Chester would have been for me also.

Now, Suyin forms the only chain between us.
I had her despite everything that made her impossible. I believed a child was born to you, not of you. I did not think that Henry would not love her. Had I, morning-sick then heavily pregnant, been slightly crazy? I deluded myself that it made no difference and Henry need never know. It was easier to slide with the days and months, till on February 13, 1970, exactly nine months to the day if one was counting — an improbability the gynaecologist had said, to have a first baby exactly nine months after conception, it usually waited and waited, refusing the world — six months after I last saw Chester, the water broke and although she did not want to come out, there she was, cut loose, with those long fringed green eyes, almost blue at first.

What if she had been born with dark brown eyes like mine instead? Would Henry have allowed himself to love her? Green un-Chinese eyes, no Yeh of mine. He did not have to say it. When he came up to my bed, I saw immediately he had been crying. I watched him cry quietly for the first time at Ah Pah’s funeral after the curfew was lifted. This time he must have cried at another death. I must have hurt him so badly that he never wanted to see me again.

‘Dadah kills!’ The anti-drug posters are plastered over the concrete pillars behind which the border guards are talking. The Causeway immigration police are even more hostile this Saturday. The two men go through our bags as if looking for smuggled swimsuits and towels.

Ellen had said we should bring along tins of ham. ‘Hello, oink, oink!’ That would get us through without stressful pawing. But I wouldn’t do it. After all, I respect Abdullah and Samad. Nasty immigration officers were simply nasty, not because they were Muslims, I argued.

‘Mom, are they looking for something?’ Suyin wrinkles her nose when they dig right down to the bottom of her duffel.

‘Yes, heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, opium, marijuana, dadah! Avon lipstick, Brecks Shampoo, Maidenform bra, Elizabeth Arden compact, Cadbury Chocolates, Newsweek....’

I stick Ellen in the rib to shut her up. They hear her mocking voice and shake out the car-mats, determined to find something. Then they lose interest and wander off to the car behind. But we have to wait until one of them remembers to wave us on.

‘Terima kaseh!’ I say loudly as Ellen puts the car into gear.

‘Ah, so rush!’ Grandma Yeh mutters in the back-seat, skeins of wool on her lap.

Suyin had reminded her that she got car-sick each time she tried knitting on a trip, but Grandma Yeh wouldn’t leave her work behind.

‘Nothing to do in Port Dickson,’ she declared, ‘only look at waves and casuarinas. Cannot swim, and not good to walk in sun. So I must have my knitting!’

‘But sand, sand, sand...’ Suyin had pointed out.
I don’t worry Grandma Yeh will have a hard time keeping sand out of her woolly — she is meticulous in everything, including keeping wool separate from sand.

In Suyin’s *World Atlas* Port Dickson and Singapore appear barely a finger-tip apart. The Esso road map is more accurate, showing new winding lines — first-class roadways — nailed down to towns. Muar, Ayer Keroh, Melaka.

Finding a toilet for Grandma Yeh is difficult. She’s sixty-one, not old by today’s standards, but as a recluse she has grown almost un-toilet-trained. The few times she travels with us we calculate distances by toilet need and access. And we cannot stop at the urine-drenched pits in the petrol kiosks. Instead we call ahead for coffee-shops in the air-conditioned hotels for Western tourists. Suyin accompanies Grandma to the fresh dry restrooms of Merlin, Emperor, and the Riveria while Ellen and I order coffee.

It is almost sunset by the time we arrive at the Casuarinas Resort. When Henry first took me there it had wooden cabins and a small swimming pool. Now the cabins have been replaced by cottages with thick pagoda-style attap roofs, carved lintels, and batik curtains drawn over wall-sized sliding doors, and the giant swimming pool shimmers like an up-turned blue bowl in which near-naked captive mermaids stroke their languorous arms. We decide who shares the two interconnecting bedrooms with twin beds in each, and Grandma will not share with Ellen.

‘Aiyah, must we have air-conditioning?’ Ellen is looking for the sunblock when the hum starts up.

‘It’s Grandma Yeh, you know she’s suspicious of Malaysian air.’

‘Singapore is better?’ Ellen and Grandma Yeh are friends only in relation to Suyin. The two of them co-operate to make sure she never misses having a family.

I don’t argue. ‘Let’s get down to the pool.’

Suyin carries the hotel beach chair for Grandma Yeh from the pool to under the casuarinas. The trees are as tall as I remembered, their low sweeping branches green-piney fragrant, and the earth around them covered with brown needles. I have brought thongs to walk under the casuarinas.

‘Really, Mom!’ Suyin says when I hug the patchy trunk, the rough bark grating against my arms.

Grandma Yeh settles into the chair. Pearl and chain, pearl and chain. She looks as restful as anyone’s grandma.

I go into the pool where Ellen is already doing her breast-stroke laps. She swims vigorously, brown arms like flashing chopsticks devouring the distances. Back and forth, back and forth, a frothing beast upsetting the equilibrium of the evening. Everyone else has packed off for tea or to get away from this sudden churning torpedo. I watch the sunshine slip over my body in the shallow end like liquid colour. Suyin wanders to the beach, an empty jam jar in hand, to pick the miniature whorled shells for which Port Dickson is noted.
Ellen’s white swim-cap bobs beside me. ‘Have you told Suyin anything about Chester?’ Her voice burbles with water like a mermaid’s just come to land.

‘She knows.’

‘But have you told her?’ She ducks her head into the shimmering pool, then raises it alert, for my answer.

‘No.’

Splashing her arms, she blows a jet of bubbles. ‘Now, why does that not surprise me?’

‘Because you know I am a coward.’ I look away from the pool. So much glittering light!

‘Not true. You can be a tough lady.’ She stands up beside me, the water slapping at her chest. ‘But you can’t be tough with Chester. Or Suyin.’

‘You know I haven’t spent any time with Chester.’ I’m anxious about Suyin walking alone on the beach. But I am also anxious about leaving Ellen with the wrong impression.

‘It’s what you feel that counts, isn’t it? I don’t know why he should matter to you after all these years. After all, he’s married, he seems to have gone on with his life. Now he wants to meet his daughter, but you aren’t in the picture, right?’

Water is dripping from her hair under the cap into her eyes. Ellen never swims with goggles. ‘Cannot. Must see where I am going, even under water!’ she joked to Suyin who had offered her her goggles.

I squint at the beach, searching for Suyin. Five foot five and a half at eleven years old. She should be easily visible. Is she wearing the Chinese straw hat Ellen had bought at the Riveria lobby this afternoon? It is the Australians who like the conical peasant hats, too coolie for Malaysians. Suyin had wanted one immediately. She has no idea of Chinese sentiment.

‘If I were you,’ Ellen says, then pauses.

I look for the tall hat. It is moving up the beach toward the casuarinas. She must have gotten tired of picking shells.

‘I would talk seriously to Suyin. Tell her about the May 13th riots. The trauma. How much you love her and how Chester is simply a minor player in her life. Of course it’s good he is finally taking an interest in her existence, but he’s leaving after his research is over. You don’t want her to be upset when he goes, do you?’

The watery sunshine is beginning to lull me. My body tilts, rocking, half-aflote.

No one has ever told me why or when I was conceived, whether in passion or duty. Was it on a daily bed, smelling of bedbugs and long dried sweat? Or on the grass in the park, late at night, after the football players, peanut vendors, other murmuring couples had left, when the heavy tropical dew was condensing like a protective mist over their inventive bodies? The beginning of my life is wrapped in silence, in sacred ignorance, as is everyone’s I know. I want Suyin to be no different from other children; her birth no freakish accident to be explained. She will arrive at her father’s significance by herself, and if she is to be hurt by him, she will make a meaning for herself out of that hurt. My hair
floats around me and air bubbles gurgle as I lie back. The water feels cool and warm all at the same time.

‘If Suyin were my daughter,’ Ellen says, ‘I wouldn’t be so relaxed. I would jaga her happiness like, like....’

Ellen stops talking.

I remember Suyin in her white snake costume. It had hurt me to watch the play. The parents laughed as she slithered on stage just as Mrs. Weng had taught her. ‘Crawl on your elbows, left, then right, and squirm from your waist down!’

Suyin had practiced on the living room floor. ‘See, my elbows are dusty, Mom! On the stage more dirtier. So black I must wash in the smelly toilet after rehearsal!’

She had quickly discovered that wriggling her body got her attention from the boys. In Singapore Suyin will never be Chinese. She will never be the lead actress. And she will learn to enjoy the eyes of the boys as her body moved, sinuously exaggerated.

The sky is burning orange bruised with purple. I close my eyes. Soon it will be sprinkled with spots, a dusk that is never totally black. The surge of the waves whooshes dully yards away, and Suyin’s cries seem like the sharing of seabirds above the water’s rhythm.

**Suyin**

If I had stayed with Grandma like she wanted me to, she would have been all right.

‘Get another chair and sit with me.’ She was arranging the green and yellow balls so the skeins would pull up together smoothly once the needles began jabbing sideways and in and out.

I liked sitting with Grandma, she was so peaceful, not like Auntie Ellen or Mom who never stopped moving. But I never wanted to sit close to her when she knitted. I was afraid one of the long needles would jab me some day, and she would be so engrossed with the pattern she wouldn’t notice the blood bleeding all over me. Jab, jab.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I want to look for shells.’

Grandma stopped fussing with the wool to stare at me. I knew I was being rude; *boh tuah, boh suay,* Auntie Ellen would have said, neither big nor small. Not knowing my place, which is the smallest in the family, although it seemed funny to hear her say that now because I am taller than all of them.

Usually I would have gone back to sit with Grandma. She was pathetic the way she needed someone around all the time for company. Mom said she had a fright a long time ago, before I was born — some hooligans who had broken into her house and killed Grandpa Yeh — and she had never been able to be alone since then. So she needed a minder — an amah — when I was in school, otherwise she worried no end.

But I was careful not to get out of sight. I stayed right by the water where I knew she could see me even if I wasn’t looking at her. I could not think when Grandma was clicking her needles, clicking like those beetles we found in the
old library books. Click, click, click, click. Deathwatch beetles, so called because they munch up books, the Biology teacher told us, more interesting to study than termites that only eat wood.

I kept right on picking up the pink and purple shells. The nicest biggest ones always seemed to have hermit crabs still in them. Click, click, click. I could hear Grandma’s needles as I dropped the shells into the marmalade jar. After a while the clicks were making me crazy. I shook out all the shells and left those with the hermits on the water’s edge. I couldn’t see bringing dead hermit crabs back to Singapore. I picked through the rest. Most were not pretty — colourless, broken or so tiny they weren’t worth keeping. But the sand felt good on my bottom after those hours in the car keeping my mouth shut about Auntie Ellen’s wild driving.

Although I had complained when Mom suggested coming to Port Dickson I must admit I had a good time on the way. Auntie Ellen concentrated on the driving — so many timber lorries and speeding taxis on the road! Mad, Mad! she kept muttering every few minutes — and Grandma fell asleep, so I looked out and had some very good ideas for my class play.

Mrs. Weng had said that even if I couldn’t act I had good dramatic sense and maybe I could try writing a play instead. But so many things to include! Costumes, short speech, long speech, characters’ names, staging, must have love interest, action cannot be too crazy, exits and entrances. Really, finally, what to say.

First, I wanted to write about the school bullies: make fun of Poon and Hong who always say bad things about me. But after meeting Chester, I stopped hating them. Chester said they were just narrow-minded mean kids.

‘Chester wants me to go to New York.’ I told Mom last week. I didn’t know what to expect. Sometimes she’d cry at nothing, sometimes she’d be laughing when I’d be crying.

She didn’t say anything, just kept stirring the Ovaltine for me. ‘Do we have the money?’

Money, Mom keeps telling me, is why we are in Singapore instead of Malaysia. ‘All I want is a home somewhere,’ she’d sing in a horrible flat key, then add, ‘Singapore is home!’

‘Singapore is money and home,’ I reminded her the last time she sang it.

But she ignored me and continued singing, ‘Far awayiii from the cauld night aiii.’ She isn’t funny even when she tries.

I don’t believe her anymore when she talks about money because I saw a Malaysian bank statement for Grandma Yeh which had seven figures in it. That’s over a million. Even in Malaysian ringitt, I think it means that we can live in Malaysia if we want to — if Mom wants to, because she makes all the decisions for us.

There must be some other reason why we are in Singapore. I think it is because we are all women, four women and no man. Grandma said we live in
Singapore because we feel safe there, but I know Mom and Auntie Ellen are afraid of nothing.

I took the cup of Ovaltine from her and asked politely, 'If we have the money, can I go?'

'There are savings for your university fees, and Grandma Yeh’s medical bills are getting higher…'

I didn’t want her to keep lying so I turned on the television set, and for once she didn’t tell me to listen to her instead of watching tv.

All mothers control their daughters, Auntie Ellen tells me, but I have three mothers, with Grandma and Auntie Ellen always backing Mom.

Chester told me about his wife, Meryl. She’s a big shot in the New York City Parks and she doesn’t want to be a mother. Why is it that American men marry big-shot women, but in Singapore men are afraid of women like Mom and Auntie Ellen?

New York is much larger than Singapore. It even has a Chinatown, Chester says, although I won’t be interested in visiting it. It can’t be as big as People’s Park. But I can stay with Chester and Meryl for two months, during the school holidays; Chester says Meryl has invited me, and wants to show me where she works and everything. He sounded really excited about my going with him.

Then I noticed that the sun was sinking like a giant egg into the sea, and suddenly I realised I couldn’t hear the needles clicking and I was alone on the beach. All the other children had gone back to the hotel for dinner. I looked for Grandma. She was still sitting on the beach chair under the shade of the casuarinas, except the shade was now so large I could only see her shadow. Perhaps she had fallen asleep, I thought guiltily, knowing how she hated to be alone. Then I remembered that Grandma could never fall asleep when she was alone and I ran toward the trees, frightened.

It is Mom who tells me she is dead, although she still looks like she is simply closing her eyes from the glare of the sunset. I stay behind with Auntie Ellen and Mom goes with Grandma in the ambulance to the hospital. It feels like a play, only I have not written it — Mom climbing up the back of the ambulance, and Grandma on the stretcher with a sheet covering her face. I would never write a play like that.

Auntie Ellen has gathered Grandma’s balls of wool; they are full of sand and brown casuarina needles. I had dropped my jar and shells on the beach but it is too dark to look for them, and we have to pack. No one wants to stay here. Tomorrow morning we are driving home and Grandma’s body will follow us in a lorry sent up by the Singapore Casket Company.

‘If I had stayed with her like she wanted me to, Grandma would have been all right,’ I cried as Mom was searching for Grandma’s identity card in the room, while the hotel doctor was waiting for the ambulance to fetch Grandma from under the casuarinas. Mom had this white colour in her face; shock, Auntie
Ellen called it, although it seemed like a determined and faraway look. She had to make a police report, call Singapore for funeral arrangements, re-organise her staff meeting for Monday, contact lawyers and Grandma’s relatives in Kuala Lumpur. She didn’t comfort me.

Auntie Ellen and I wait alone a long time for Mom to return from the hospital.

‘You’ll be getting Grandma Yeh’s assets when you become eighteen,’ Auntie Ellen whispers, sitting up in my bed and brushing my hair. ‘Then you can leave Singapore if you wish.’

I am getting drowsy as the brush eases through my hair, up then down, up then down, and I remember Mom singing her lullabies. I see Chester like a wind-up toy flying in the wild tornado to America; he’s growing smaller and smaller, and my eyes close.
In the May 27th, 1784 edition of the *Calcutta Gazette*, one of the earliest and most widely read of all British India’s newspapers, the following notice appeared:

A subscription is opened at the Bengal Bank, for the relief of the Non-Commissioned and private Europeans, of the King’s and Company’s Troops in the Carnatic, who were unfortunately captured during the war with the Nabob Tippoo Sultan, and have lately been released from their confinement, and the same is to extend to all other Europeans of the lower class in the same predicament ....

Calcutta dwellers of the late eighteenth century were a charitable lot, it seems, for in 1786, the *Gazette* reported that a performance of the *Fair Penitent* three days earlier had been well attended and that the money raised would benefit the Orphan Society. Prior to the establishment of this Society, these children, described further on as the ‘offspring of our European soldiers’, were permitted to ‘lead lives of ignorance and vice in the Barracks’, but, we are reassured, ‘being now under suitable masters ... will ... instead of being a disgrace to the English name, become useful members of the State’ (*Selections from Calcutta Gazettes*, p. 146).

Useful, perhaps, as Mrs. Arend is, who places an advertisement in the *Gazette* on November 22nd, 1787, in which she ‘[h]umbly begs leave to acquaint the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Settlement, that she washes and dresses Silk Stockings, Brussell’s Lace, and clear starches in general’ and also ‘respectfully informs the Ladies that she dresses hair in the neatest and most fashionable manner’. She says that she is willing to ‘wait upon any Lady at her own house on the shortest notice’ (*Selections from Calcutta Gazettes*, p. 226).

The existence of war-ravaged poor people, salvaged orphans, and a washerwoman who doubles as a ladies’ hairdresser tells us that not all white people in India during the time of the British Empire belonged to the middle or upper classes. But were you to read most contemporary scholarship about colonial India, you might not be able to guess this. Historian David Arnold made a similar observation almost twenty years ago. In 1979 he declared that current writing about the British in India ‘would lead an otherwise uninformed reader to suppose that its European community consisted almost entirely of civil servants, army officers, planters and businessmen’, the cream of British India’s white elite. Tellingly, he adds, ‘That, no doubt, was how the Raj chose to see itself’.
In post-colonial studies we pride ourselves on our ability to dismantle the ideology of British imperialism and reveal the damaging assumptions on which it historically depended. We know that imperialist racism rests on a conception of the world in which a stable, bounded Europe is seen constantly confronting its equally stable, bounded racial other. Having developed some extraordinarily useful and subtle theories about the workings of race and gender in colonialist as well as neo-colonialist contexts, when it comes to class and literary analysis and the history of the British Empire, we choose to see the Raj as it chose to see itself — as a stable, bounded, homogeneous ruling white community. But even in the earlier years of the Raj, the years reflected in the passages from the Calcutta Gazette, such a community did not exist. And by the final quarter of the nineteenth century, at the height of Empire, nearly half of all Europeans in India were what officials liked to call ‘poor whites’.

According to Kenneth Ballhatchet, during the British Empire, the ‘preservation of social distance ... [between poor whites and the elites was] essential to the maintenance of structures of power and authority’. Ballhatchet manages to convey in his book an insight of which few other scholars in either the disciplines of history or literary studies seem to be aware — specifically, that the British Raj was both a race — and a class-conscious institution and that the continued hegemony of the white elite classes in colonial India was dependent on the suppression of those white people who were lower on the social scale as much as it was dependent on the persistent subjugation of the Indian population.

But we tend to look through elite class eyes in post-colonial literary studies, and, therefore, we are hugely limited in what we can know of the working classes. Because, of course, privilege hampers perception. This lack of knowledge about the political, social, experiential, and historical realities of class prevents us from creating adequate theories of class. In place of adequate theories are empty references: post-colonialists are often able to identify working-class characters but are just as commonly unable or perhaps unwilling to examine the implications of these characters’ class status in the work they are discussing. The word ‘class’ also sometimes appears in post-colonial articles and books, tagged uneasily on to the end of too frequently repeated phrases such as ‘race, gender, and class’. But while issues of race and gender are accorded the kind of detailed scrutiny for which post-colonial critiques are justifiably appreciated, the significance of class — its effects, its constructions, its contradictions — almost always falls by the wayside. I’m not overgeneralising when I say that as a primary interpretive category — as primary as gender and race and hence as deserving of careful and thoughtful contextual analysis — class has been virtually ignored.

Aijaz Ahmad, one of the few post-colonial scholars who has written about class in some detail and with some finesse, does not think this is an accidental exclusion. Ahmad takes on Edward Said’s ideas about the privileged site of the migrant intellectual in post-colonial theory, and he argues that a middle-class
alliance among these scholars and writers, together with a more generally held postmodernist mistrust of Marxism, has suppressed the analysis of class:

the ideological ambiguity in these rhetorics of migrancy resides in the key fact that the migrant in question comes from a nation which is subordinated in the imperialist system of intra-state relationships but, simultaneously, from the class, more often than not, which is the dominant class within the nation — this, in turn, makes it possible for that migrant to arrive in the metropolitan country to join not the working classes but the professional middle strata, hence to forge a kind of rhetoric which submerges the class question and speaks of migrancy as an ontological condition, more or less.  

Ahmad’s theory is provocative, and, while I believe that it goes some of the way towards explaining the deficiency of class analyses in colonial and post-colonial studies, it doesn’t account for a similar reticence to address class issues among post-colonialists who are not ‘migrants’. So it seems to me that the problem is wider than this.

As difficult as race is to theorise, class is possibly even more vexed, particularly in those settler-colony countries (Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia) where post-colonial studies is an increasingly valued disciplinary area. Among the founding narratives of these nations, which saw so much European immigration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was the myth that the entrenched class structures of Europe could be left behind and that upward mobility was both desirable and possible once immigrants reached the ‘new world’. In my own Canadian society, this myth is a given in our national identity, so much a given that we are frequently unable to recognise class when it is staring us in the face. We often name its effects (homelessness, squeegee kids, poverty, the widening gap between the rich and the poor), but are unable to see the links between the effects and the complex structures that produce them. A perfect example of this blind spot in our national psyche is a recent front-page story in our national newspaper, The Globe and Mail, which reported, with something like surprise, that a new Statistics Canada study has discovered ‘a link between parents’ income — and the way they earn it — and the future income of their offspring....’ Not once is the word ‘class’ mentioned in this story, and the absence of this word points to a further absence of understanding about how class works in our educational, economic, political, legal, and social systems. In this particular story this inability to comprehend the structures of class results in an unstated assumption that the answers to the problems identified in the study are individualist ones: the headline for the story reads, ‘How rich will your kids be? That depends on you’ (The Globe and Mail, p. A1), a statement which seems to suggest that individual parents are the ones at fault when their offspring are unable to ‘get ahead’ (The Globe and Mail, p. A14). Our belief in our classlessness (a belief we take into our university classrooms) prevents us from developing theories that speak to our experiences of class, which, in turn, limits our interpretations of things.

Added to this fantasy of classlessness is a tendency specific to post-colonial theory to view the texts produced out of the colonial encounter between Europe
and its colonised populations solely in terms of those texts’ relationship to that encounter. In pursuit of theories that explain the ideologies of the coloniser and the colonised, the ruler and the ruled, distinctions that exist within the national cultures themselves get overlooked. Differences attributable to regional and religious affiliation, gender and class political locations are likely to be subsumed into the grander narrative of the colonial divide.

And there is one more reason why there is little discussion of class in post-colonial studies. It seems to me that there is a noticeable carelessness and, with a few excellent exceptions, general indifference to class analysis in all the other areas of literary studies. And by analysis here, I mean the kind of scrupulous interrogations and reconstructions of voice that have made feminist critiques of gender and post-colonialist critiques of race such important contributions to our discipline. Marxism has given us class as a category but has imbued it with an economic and labour-based essentialism that, even today, 150 years after Marx elaborated his theories of the proletariat, gets in the way of our attempts to understand working-class perspectives on middle-class institutions and discourses. The Marxist teleology, which can take us only and inevitably towards revolution, also allows many Marxist critics to overlook both the subtlety and historical specificity of working-class defiances and the multitudinous efforts of ruling class discourses to contain those defiances. Not for a minute do I want to suggest that Marxist interpretations of literary or historical texts are useless. On the contrary, the materialist rigour with which Marxist textual critics have assailed our assumptions about the cultural centrality of literature and through which they have compiled an impressive collection of rebellious re-readings of history makes possible the kind of class analysis I am advocating in this essay. But surely I am not going out on a limb when I say that Marxism has been domesticated in at least North American literature departments and that that domestication is in part the result of Marxist theory’s own complicity with the dominant middle-class discourses that continue to provide the intellectual foundations of our discipline. If this were not so, then why, after decades of interaction with literary theory, has Marxism failed to create accessible and well-known curriculums of working-class writing that we might study and teach and failed to maintain a sustainable subversive site from which to interrogate the powerful class-based perspectives that monopolise English departments? Though susceptible to criticisms about its interactions with liberalism, neo-imperialism, and essentialism, academic feminism has, nevertheless, made gender a category for consideration and debate in our studies and our professional politics. Yet Marxism has not succeeded in doing this for its central concept: class.

The final result, then, of these combined tendencies — this screening out of difference other than that generated by imperialist racism, a middle-class alliance among post-colonial immigrant intellectuals and the rejection in settler-colony nationalism and in literature departments of class as a significant issue — is the dearth of good class analyses in post-colonialist scholarship, and this is especially true in scholarship about the colonisers. So in this paper I’m offering
a classed reading of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem 'Danny Deever', a poem that describes a significant event in working-class soldiers' lives in India — namely, the execution of a fellow soldier — but that refuses to see the full implications of that event from working-class perspectives. By so refusing, the poem shows its attachment to the middle-class supremacy in colonial India that ensured that Kipling’s portrait of the soldiers would be one of the only portraits available to the public. For the most part, it is still his truth about them that we have inherited. What I further hope to suggest in this paper is not only that class analyses open up a wider range of possibilities in post-colonial studies but that the absence of class as a primary interpretative paradigm produces faulty assumptions and questionable interpretations. Race and gender are important, but, even together, they are not enough. Failing to see class, failing to develop those insights from post-colonial, feminist, and Marxist theory that can take us beyond the limitations of today's post-colonialism, replicates the structured invisibility of the working classes embedded in the very discourses — imperialism and nationalism — that we claim to be dismantling in post-colonial studies.

'Danny Deever' is a seemingly simple poem that records what was for white working-class soldiers of the British Raj a rather complex and emotionally wrought experience: being compelled to witness and hence to participate in the brutal execution of another soldier. The narrative perspective through which Kipling allows us to look is that of an old soldier, perhaps the actual Colour-Sergeant named in the poem. The soldiers' terrible misgivings about this act of regimental murder, in which they are the star performers and for which they are also its principal and intended audience, are conveyed to the reader not only through the anxious questions of a young recruit to the older and wiser Sergeant but also by the Sergeant's apparent unwillingness to entirely confront the fact that both he and his young subordinate are about to become collaborators in something that we begin to suspect is a travesty of justice. The Colour-Sergeant's horror and his attempt to protect the young soldier from achieving a full knowledge of the event is implied through his alternate disclosure and avoidance of the truth:

'They are hangin' Danny Deever, they are marchin' of 'im round,
They 'ave 'alted Danny Deever by 'is coffin on the ground;
An' 'e'll swing in 'arf a minute for a sneakin' shootin' hound —
O they're hangin' Danny Deever in the mornin'!'

The Colour-Sergeant seems completely unaware of his contradiction here, his alternate assertion that the weather is both cold and hot, for he is trying to find the usual, safe weather reasons for soldiers to hyperventilate and to faint in order, somehow, to reassure the young recruit, 'Files-on-Parade', that

"What makes the rear-rank breathe so 'ard?' said Files-on-Parade.
'It's bitter cold, it's bitter cold,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
'What makes that front-rank man fall down?' says Files-on-Parade.
'A touch o' sun, a touch o' sun,' the Colour-Sergeant said.
They are hangin' Danny Deever, they are marchin' of 'im round,
They 'ave 'alted Danny Deever by 'is coffin on the ground;
An' 'e'll swing in 'arf a minute for a sneakin' shootin' hound —
O they're hangin' Danny Deever in the mornin'!"
everything is all right. But we know that everything is not all right, that the Colour-Sergeant is seriously distracted by the event they are all about to witness, and that the soldiers are gasping and fainting with fear.

In ‘Danny Deever’ Kipling manages to capture the enormous trepidation that surrounded this experience of watching an execution in the nineteenth-century British Army in India. Many soldiers, in their memoirs about their time in India, have written about this event and have testified to this feeling of trepidation. And, although it is not likely that he himself witnessed such an act, we can still surmise that he probably heard barrack-room tales about earlier executions, tales that conveyed the apprehension of the soldiers. We can say, then, that in ‘Danny Deever,’ Kipling demonstrates his acute abilities as an outside observer, abilities which have won him an audience among working-class people in England and acclaim from academics for the accuracy of his depiction of the lives of ordinary British soldiers — the Tommy Atkins to whom he dedicates the collection of poetry that contains ‘Danny Deever’, *Barrack-Room Ballads*, and about whom he has written so extensively and passionately in his soldier poems and stories. Kipling manages to get it right enough that some working-class people have been willing, over the years, to read his writings about the soldiers and to find in them something that speaks to them about their own lives and the lives of their brothers, fathers, uncles, and sons who spent time as soldiers in India. But, like so many middle-class authors who are careful observers and, subsequently, recorders of working-class lives, when Kipling goes beyond description into interpretation, explanation, and justification, he reins in the working-class perspective that he has so comfortably adopted, thereby preventing it from undermining the class hegemony that he himself represents, he the published, middle-class writer who, because of his class status, gets to construct working-class lives for his own purposes and in the absence of competing public creations from working-class writers. In other words, when there is almost nothing being published about soldiers in India by working-class writers, or at least nothing that is given the kind of attention Kipling’s stories and poems were accorded, who, from that same position of privilege, can gainsay Kipling? He has cornered the market on the nineteenth-century British soldier in India. What he said was and is accepted as truth, as an accurate portrait.

That ‘Danny Deever’ is a poem written by a member of the English middle class and, predominantly, a poem written for that class becomes evident when we examine what it does when it moves beyond description and into explanation. The poem tells us that Danny Deever is a ‘sneakin’ shootin’ hound’ (p. 4) who ‘shot a comrade sleepin’’ (p. 5) and that for this he is being hanged. Danny Deever, therefore, is a murderer, who has committed a crime that would have garnered the same punishment had he done it back home in England. So what the poem becomes with such an explanation as its foundation is basically a voyeuristic glimpse at a scene of execution and at the wild anxiety of the working-class men who are forced to play the witnesses and executioners. But, given the severity of the apprehension in the poem, this seems just barely a
sufficient interpretation. It doesn’t do the poem justice, for it doesn’t explain the sense of kinship that the men seem to feel with Danny, a recognition that we hear in the third stanza:

‘Is cot was right-‘ and cot to mine,’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘E’s sleepin’ out an’ far to-night,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.
‘I’ve drunk ’is beer a score o’ times,’ said Files-on-Parade.
‘E’s drinkin’ bitter beer alone,’ the Colour-Sergeant said. (p. 4)

In spite of the Colour-Sergeant’s attempt to paint Danny as divorced from the group, alone and distant, in spite of this attempt to lead the young recruit away from the truth, he is nevertheless coming to the horrific realisation here that they are killing one of their own. It is this realisation that makes the Colour-Sergeant ‘look so white, so white’ (p. 3) at the start of the poem, because, being an Old Soldier, he knows the implications of this execution before it occurs, and it is this realisation that leaves the new soldiers so frightened at the end: ‘Ho! the young recruits are shakin’, an’ they’ll want their beer to-day, After hangin’ Danny Deever in the mornin’ (p. 5). The terrifying truth at the heart of this poem is that the next step beyond witnessing and participating in the murder of one of your own is being murdered by your own. The soldiers gasp and faint and shake in this poem because they know they could be next.

But this reading, though it makes emotional sense, does not make logical sense. For surely it is a real stretch for us to believe that all of the regimental soldiers are potential murderers of their own comrades. While a diehard hater of the working classes might raise a spectre this chilling, it is hard to believe that Kipling, whose writing attests to his affection and admiration for working-class men, would traffic in such possibilities. There is something wrong in this poem or, at least, something not quite right. And it is my contention that the not-quite-right thing here is the result of missing information, information which would create a justification for the soldiers’ behaviour that would be both emotionally and logically sensible.

What is missing from this poem, what Kipling refuses to tell us, is that nineteenth-century white soldiers in India were perfectly justified in being fearful at the executions of fellow soldiers, for, far from there being some kind of hard and fast rule about which offences warranted a punishment of death and which did not, the act of execution in the Army was a political one; it was often the class politics of a particular moment that determined whether or not a man would be executed. Moreover, executions functioned for soldiers as a sign that those who witnessed and participated in one execution might just as easily be the victims of another. They were also spectacles staged by a regiment’s middle, and upper-class officers, with the explicit and powerfully communal support of the authoritative institution that was the British Army and, in many cases, the support of the middle-class white community in India, and their intended meaning was graphically clear, namely, that soldiers should keep in their assigned places and be deferential to their officers, be submissive, be politically passive or face the possibility that they might reap fatal consequences for any behaviour which suddenly, sometimes shockingly, could be deemed an act of
insubordination. Throughout the nineteenth century, white soldiers in India were executed for the flimsiest of reasons: for striking an officer, for talking back to an officer, or for failing to follow an officer’s order. The usual official justification for executing a soldier for these kinds of perceived failures in deference inevitably involved some appeal to the overall good of the Army and the British state in India.

For instance, in 1860, Private William Johnson was charged with disobeying a lawful command when he defied an order by a Lance Sergeant to confine a fellow soldier for refusing to go to his cot. He was court martialed, convicted, and then executed by firing squad. The then Commander-in-Chief, Sir Hugh Rose, approved the sentence, arguing that a soldier’s disobedience ‘is justly considered one of the worst and most dangerous crimes a soldier can commit’ because it ‘may cause the defeat of an army: the success of a mutiny; the downfall of a state’. In collusion with such heady middle-class justifications for the execution of a working-class soldier, one unidentified writer, a clergyman, in the December 1860 issue of The Anglo-Indian Magazine insisted that Britain’s Indian Empire itself was at stake when Private Johnson refused to confine his comrade for failing to go to his cot when ordered. He went even further, adding, in an address to the solider, that by acting on their own volition, soldiers were actually sinning against God:

Your orders are express. Your conscience tells you plainly what you ought to do. The Universal sovereign — the Lord of Heaven and Earth — has laid his commands upon you. Will you resist? Will you violate the order of the moral world? Will you set at nought the authority of the Most High? (The Anglo-Indian Magazine, p. 226)

So not only was the killing of Private Johnson endorsed by the state, here it is accorded divine sanction as well. For this writer and for Army official Hugh Rose, how easily middle-class interests are made to seem identical with those of the nation, the Empire, even of heaven. Such heady connections serve, of course, to disguise and render invisible the white middle-class dominance that was preserved in India by, among other things, the execution of Private Johnson.

But if the middle-class voices are the loudest, they are not the only ones speaking. Working-class responses to hugely significant events, like Johnson’s death, which were seen as great injustices, survive to this day in the letters, memoirs, songs, and stories left by the soldiers themselves. In the case of Johnson, according to Peter Stanley, author of White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India, 1825–1875, ‘The impact of the execution ... was so powerful that long after distorted accounts of the event still circulated in Indian barrack-rooms among soldiers who had not been born in 1860’. Kipling, a frequenter of barrack-rooms in the 1880s and a life-long admirer of the Army’s rank and file, might well have heard the soldiers’ stories of Johnson’s execution. But if he did, if indeed Danny Deever is Private William Johnson turned murderer, in Kipling’s poem it is not so much the soldiers’ version of the event that we get, but simply a glimpse into their sense that they are vulnerable somehow. It takes the historical records and the soldiers’ voices to hear in that expression of
vulnerability a fear of the consequences of middle-class dominance in their lives and their deaths.

Many of the soldiers who were forced to witness the executions of their comrades communicated in their writings their fear, their outrage, and their resistance to the class structure of Britain and the British Army, which allowed a class of ill-equipped, contemptuous, and frequently drunk men to have such enormous control over their lives, even to the point of authorising their execution. One such angry and frightened soldier, Private Waterfield of Her Majesty’s 32nd Regiment of Foot, after watching the execution of three of his fellow soldiers, recalls the overwhelming emotional reactions that the first execution elicited. He saw men, he said, ‘who had seen death in a thousand shapes now [weep] like children at the thought of the tyrannical scene they had that morning witnessed’. Private Waterfield’s fury at the Army drives him to characterise these events as motivated by blood lust on the part of the officers:

But, alas! the awful drama was not to finish here. The rulers of the Army were not yet satiated: they still craved for the blood of more victims, for during the remaining eleven days of this month we witnessed two more military murders. One of the Lancers, and one of the 32nd, the latter for striking a sergeant. Such scenes as the above only tend to make the soldier loathe instead of honouring his profession. (Memoirs of Private Waterfield, pp. 31–32)

For Private Waterfield, and for so many other soldiers who have left us extensive descriptions of the conditions under which they served in India, the British Army in India is an institution that tortures soldiers with its drills and its marches, that exploits them with its pay, that drives them to drink and to suicide, and that sometimes executes them unjustifiably. This is hardly the Army life we see depicted in Kipling’s stories and poems about Tommy Atkins in India.

So how can we account for this difference between Kipling’s vision of the soldier’s life and their remembrances? One of the things we surely cannot forget is the class from which Kipling sprang and to which he was indebted in his publishing career. Kipling follows a fairly standard middle-class line when he creates his Danny Deever and the soldiers who watch him die; that is he depicts the working classes as fundamentally nonsensical, behaving in ways that seem excessive or extraordinary given the context. The result of depictions like this one is that working-class defiances get buried under the weight of middle-class stereotypes and middle-class political imperatives. Kipling couldn’t show a Danny Deever unjustly convicted and executed, for were he to do so, he would call into serious question the British Army, an institution he revered. While he is willing to suggest in his stories and poems that certain reforms will make life easier for the British soldier in India — better rations, better educational opportunities, better overall treatment by the British public at large — none of the changes implicit in such reforms would radically alter the class structure of the Army or its middle-class ascendancy. Furthermore, Kipling is obviously not willing to contribute to the undermining of the system that has created the Army, namely, the class system of England, which by the end of the nineteenth century was in the control of the capitalist middle classes. We can ultimately
conclude that Kipling’s sympathy for Tommy Atkins only goes so far, only as far as his own investments in the middle-class hegemony that constructed and privileged him.

NOTES

1. Selections from Calcutta Gazettes of the Years 1784, 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788. Showing the Political and Social Condition of the English in India Eighty Years Ago. W.S. Seton-Karr ed. (Calcutta: Government of India, 1864). p. 43. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.


Although the term ‘subaltern’ is ostensibly a shifting category of subordination, it has hardened somewhat in recent literary and historical scholarship, coming to be understood primarily as a signifier for the most dispossessed people among subject, rather than colonising, populations. Therefore, I hesitate to use this term in reference to the white working classes of colonial India. Furthermore, I have not found literary examinations of the subaltern sufficient substitutes for good class analyses because, while it is a theoretically useful category, which has produced some illuminating, even inspiring explications in post-colonial literary criticism, in practice explorations of subaltern sites slip too easily into enormous generalisations about the nature of subalternity. Too often in post-colonial interpretations a preconceived idea about the subaltern seems to determine how the critic will read the subaltern, or, to put it another way, the subaltern exists prior to its discursive construction in literature. (I have written about this in more detail in my book, Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History [Durham: Duke UP. 1996], particularly in chapters 3, 4, and 5.) But I’m much more interested in promoting and contributing to a body of writing on class that is historically and textually specific, that is willing to perceive class as possessing no essence but instead emerging from various effects — social, cultural, linguistic, economic, political, experiential, etc. — that allows class experience and class construction to be contradictory and fragmented and occasionally, momentarily unified, and that sees texts not as places where class is represented but where it is in the process of being formed. The best insights of various subalternist critics are, it seems to me, helpful in this kind of class critique.


5. The Globe and Mail (November 6, 1998). p. A1. All further references are to this issue and are included in the text.

I use the word ‘classed’ in much the same way that I (and many other feminists) use the word ‘gendered’. To do a gendered reading of a text generally means to render visible the specific historical and cultural structures of and assumptions — often unconscious — about gender that inform a text. A ‘classed’ reading seeks to uncover
and interpret the structures of class that inevitably exist alongside and intertwined with systems of gender, race, sexuality, etc.

8 Rudyard Kipling, *Barrack-room Ballads* (Oxford and New York: Woodstock, 1892 and 1993), p. 4. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.

9 See, for instance, Byron Farwell’s book on the Victorian and Edwardian army, entitled *Mr. Kipling’s Army: All the Queen’s Men* (New York: Norton, 1981), in which Kipling’s representations of the working-class British soldiers, their wives, and their children are used as historical documents and viewed by Farwell as accurate reflections of these people’s experiences. Only once does Farwell question Kipling, when he suggests that he may have exaggerated when he wrote in ‘The Rout of the White Hussars’ that ‘the bandmaster is one degree more important than the Colonel’ (qtd. in *Mr. Kipling’s Army*, p. 130).

10 Quoted in ‘The 5th Europeans’ in *The Anglo-Indian Magazine: A Soldier’s Friend and Home Companion* (No. 32, December 1860), p. 225. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.


12 Private Waterfield, *The Memoirs of Private Waterfield, Soldier in Her Majesty’s 32nd Regiment of Foot (Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry) 1842–57*, Arthur Swinson and Donald Scott, ed. (London: Cornwall, 1968), p. 31. All further references are to this volume and are included in the text.
Mama died two nights ago. Very quietly. No one expected. We were surprised because she’s always so ... noisy. Dono wy but I didin cry much. In fac, I tink I feel ... diffren ... maybe like more free. Anyway, she never love me much la. I know because she even tole somebody, in fron of me. “I only love der boys,” she said. “Der girl I hate”.

Mama love der younes boy der mose. Everything Huat. “Waa, my Huat got firs class in der U ... my Huat jus back from tour, wen to Englan. You know how much dat cos?” Huat is now working in Kolumpur, seldom come back. Mama sick time, I call him to come and see her, he said got too much work. Now he’s crying at der coffin. Wafor wan to cry now? Wen she was alive, nobody cared, now wy cry?

Firs Broder lagi worse. He living here in Penang, only take twenty minutes to come from his house, awso never bodered to come. Only wen he wants to borrow money, hnaa he will come lah. So many times he’s taken money from Mama, from me, from dono how many people. Until der spinster auntie living opposite said she heard he’s awso borrowing from der chettiar. Dat one der intres no joke. Every hundred, he got to give intres twenty. So he got no money lef to return us. Mama awways said it’s like the river of no return.

Der las time Mama came back from hospital he came wit his wife and son to see her, den he never came again. She phone him, ask him wy, he said der wife woan let. Wy woan let? He said dono. Mama said his wife like three days wind, four days rain. Cannot tell wen her mood will change. But wat was so bad dat she woan let him come for so long? Eight muns he never came. Mama died witout seeing him again. Today he tole me he coulden sleep der whole night las night. I wanted to tell him I wonder wy.

Doctor said Mama died of stroke. Someting like der vein in her head burs. She had very high blood but she never cared one, dat’s der trouble wit her. Der spinster auntie, Bor Ee, awways ars her to take care, doan eat dis, doan eat dat, but she still doan care. She said, “I got my medicine, never mind”. Firs Broder awso got high blood but he so young awso scared, dare not even eat outside. Little bit of salt cannot. But she — “I hentam anything la. Big prawn awso I eat. Mutton. Chhar koay teow, my favourite. Anything”.

Mama awways said she like steel. “Sometimes my heart pain wen I carry der basket going marketing. Wokking from der market to my car hnaa pain laa but still I go”. She said she very clever woman. How if not for her, we would all be
nowair. Some more looking young for a woman or ready sixty-eight. She got married young actually, not yet eighteen. Dat time wartime and der Jappenees were looking for virgin girls to rape, so Grampa matchmake her to one of der Quek family in Pekan Buluh. Der town was very small and her husban very timid one. Mama aways call him idiot. One time, Mama said, he wen for interview for a job but he got so nervous he couldn toke, because the manager was an ang moh. He turn pale, said he wanted to vomit and got out of der room. He was shaking all over — aiyah, you should see how Mama make like him wen she tole us about it. Funny laa. She real joker sometimes.

So, of course he diden get der job lah. Finally, got some frien help him to get Gahmen job in der Healt Departmen as ... dono clerk or jus go aroun to check for mosquitoes. Mama said like labourer’s job but I never ars him. Actually, he’s not my real fader.

Mama met my real fader in Penang a few years after she gave birt to Firs Broder. He was very rich, multi-millionaire, Mama said, got big house in Nortam Road we can only look at wen we pass by. He was much older dan Mama and he awready got wife and chiren, but of course he never let dem know. Quite fierce la, even at dat time got people doing dat kind of ting. And some more awready married. Mama was still living in Pekan Buluh. I done how her husban took it. I tink some people knew den she mus have a boyfrien. After I was born and den Huat, Papa bought Mama a house in Penang, far from town so no one will know. Mama just lef her husban behind in Pekan Buluh and move into der house wit all us chiren.

Den Papa died wen I was only fourteen years old. Mama was very los. She cried a lot. I cried awso. But Huat diden cry at all, he never had any feeling for Papa. Mama was awso very sad because she coulden go to der funeral, afraid Papa’s family will find out he was keeping her. Papa lef us nutting excep der house, der Austin car Mama was driving, and an insuran policy wort about $7,000. Suddenly, Mama had no income and she had to take care of us. She kep diggin her saving until in de en, she had no choice, she had to sell der house. “I had to bite my teet and do it,” Mama awways said. It was like losing someting very precious. She sold der house for $18,000, but now it is wort maybe ten times.

But wat to do? We move to stay wit Gramma and Grampa and Mama became like a servan to dem, cooking, taking care of der house, looking after dem. She diden feel comfortable like in her own house. Some more, her sisters were jealous because dey were scared she would take over der house wen Gramma and Grampa died. But Mama was awways dreaming of getting her own house one day. She let Huat go to der U, hoping dat wen he come out, he can get a good job and make a lot of money and buy a house. And she and me can move in and stay wit him.

Dat never happen. He got a good job, den he got married, he got chiren. Two years ago, he bought a house in Kolumpur. You tink he call us in? Las time, before he got married, he bought insuran and put in girlfrien’s name. Wafor put in her name? She was not even married to him. Put lah in my name. I put mine in his name waat. But he doan care one la. Der night Gramma died, he wen out
dancing. Quietly took out a green shirt, shiny one you know, and change at a phone boot, like Superman! Mama knew waat but she never stop him. She let him do everything he wanted but she awways stop me from doing wat I wan. Because Mama was saving money for him to go to U, I coulden go to Form Six. Mama said no point for a girl to study so high, better go and get a job. Den wen I was already working, she said I cannot go out late at night, afterds kena rape. “See chhow lok,” she scolded me all der time, “you doan know ah you cannot trus men nowadays! If dey put someting in your drink, den you know lah. If anyting happens to you, doan come back, I woan accep you as my daughter”. Look at me now. I’m more dan forty and still not married. “You become a spinster better still la,” Mama use to say. “You can look after me wen I’m old”. But I doewan to become a spinster.

She had a bad mout la. Sometimes I wonder wat’s der poin for her to be so religious, saying Buddis prayers every morning. Like dat time she call Firs Broder’s wife Carol a low-class girl and somebody reported to Carol. Waa, nex day, Carol came to tooi chee. “What do you mean I am a low-class girl?” she shouted and all der neighbours came out. It was so loud. “How can you call me dat, hnuh? Waa, in fron of me, you act so good but behind my back you say all kinds of tings. Somebody tole me you got ole man keeping you las time, your chiren got diffren fader, so you got more class or I got more class? If you tink I am so cheap, wy you let me marry your son? Wy not we get a divorce? Come lah, tomorrow we go to court and get a divorce!”

Shameful laa, dat quarrel. After dat, Carol never tok to Mama. Den she got pregnan and she was losing blood a lot and she had to be admitted. But Broder had no money to admit so Mama had to come to der rescue. So later, Carol realise lah and she tok wit Mama again. And wen der baby came out, Mama gave Carol ang pow and boil strengtening herbs for her to drink. I wonder how Mama can forgive dat bitch after all der bad tings she said. But I suppose Mama is like dat. She say tings and later regret. It mus be her temper la. Very bad. Wen Firs Broder was a baby, he cried a lot, and one time Mama got irritated she press a pillow over his face and nearly kill him.

“Ee m chai see ah,” Mama awways said wen she got angry wit Firs Broder for letting Carol control him. But he awso one kind la, so scared of his wife. Dey are staying wit his moder-in-law because Carol prefer it. It really broke Mama’s heart because der son mus awways bring back der wife to stay, not go and belong to der wife’s family. It’s disgraceful. So Mama awways scole him and say how hard she took care of him wen he was a baby. Dat time, he use to tarik a lot and she had to wok miles into der coconut estate to look for a medium to cure der fit. He tole her she had to catch cockroaches and take out deir intestine and boil in water, den let Broder drink. She did dis everyday for a few weeks, den only he was cured.
Mama died wit little money lef. A bit of jewelry. A seventeen-year-old lor cho’ car. Dere’s enough for a decen funeral. She awways wanted dat. Die awso mus be gran. Good ting der place to keep her bones at der Buddis temple is paid for awready. Der problem now is maybe her sisters will come and take over der house so dat means I’ll have to move out. Only las week, Mama was saying she wish she had money to buy a house, small one awso never mind. “I wan to die in my own house,” she said. It was as if she knew.

I tink for her funeral we mus arrange for her coffin to pass by our ole house. Mama might wan to see it again, for der las time.
AGNES YEOW

The Parody of Conquest in the Rainforest of Borneo: A Tale of Two Explorers

Darwin once said that entering the tropics was akin to entering a whole new planet and many adventurous travellers to Southeast Asia echoed that sentiment: Isabella Bird in the nineteenth century and Eric Hansen and Redmond O’Hanlon in the late twentieth. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that the concept of terra incognita is never more forcefully manifested than in that other planet within the planet: that ecological marvel known as the rainforest. Borneo, third largest island in the world, is the site of one of the world’s remaining primary jungle, eighty percent covered in ‘steaming tropical rainforest’ as Hansen himself enthuses in his book, Stranger in the Forest (1990).

The literary naturalist, Redmond O’Hanlon, and poet-friend, James Fenton, geared themselves for the penetration of this immense, unknown wilderness by consulting the Special Air Service in Hereford, famous or infamous for its vast experience in jungle reconnaissance and warfare. In O’Hanlon’s comic account, Into the Heart of Borneo (1985), the bungling jungle backpackers (an unlikely but nonetheless complementary duo, as O’Hanlon perceives it) approach the rainforest as one would a battlefield or at the very least, an alien country teeming with sinister enemies of the blood-sucking leech variety. Indeed, if these travellers’ tales are to be deemed reliable, survival on this hostile and yet alluring planet depended on the express admission of one’s vulnerability and abject helplessness for the jungle is an undiscriminating organic element, completely foreign and challenging. It demands of whoever ventures within its boundaries a radically altered mindset and temperament and in effect, a whole new personality and discipline.

Clearly, both O’Hanlon and Hansen were also conscious of the literary genre of which they were practitioners and inheritors and, to a large degree, set themselves up to parody the conventions and rhetoric of rainforest exploration. The result is near-carnivalesque laughter in the jungles of Borneo: the narratorial figures come across as adventure heroes-cum-conquerors of an hilarious sort as both men attempt to grapple with (and at times overturn) textual constraints and endure actual physical travails in mimicry of their illustrious predecessors.

I would also like to suggest at this juncture that ways of seeing the rainforest as a cultural entity, a mode of being and a way of life, are dominant issues
raised by both these narratives. In *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, Neha Dias argues that ‘looking at objects’ exhibited in, say, a museum of anthropology enables a whole culture to be visualised and spatialised by means of typological and geographical arrangement (pp. 165–7) and that the corollary of that facility is that a society brought up on a diet of visual analogies can therefore objectify the Other quite readily as something definable, representational and tangible. The abstract becomes grounded in solid artefacts such as maps, images, diagrams, ethnographic specimen and even the printed word. The rainforest is one such ‘cultural museum’ of systemically ordered, valuable objects, animate or otherwise. The narrators barely miss anything, are in fact on the lookout, eagle-eyed and desirous of a rare sighting. Fenton constantly irritates O’Hanlon by gloating over his supposed spotting of rare species and animal behaviour. The deliberately ironic threat, ‘I shall see something marvellous’ (p. 133), is reminiscent of Columbus’s own narrated voyage to the New World (also very much a new planet in its extra-terrestrial spectacle) where wonders (and not necessarily monstrosities) abound. The sense of the marvellous validates and empowers Columbus’s claims as eyewitness, silencing his detractors and other sceptics in the process. I would like to propose that the rainforest of Borneo is a culture of marvels in the eyes of Occidentals who derive great pleasure in simply looking.

In addition, in this new, wonderfully inexplicable construct called the rainforest, the marvels are not so much embodied in the weird or the grotesque but relocated in the unnerved traveller’s initial sense of displacement and bewilderment and his final triumphant assimilation into the culture. Here is a taste of Hansen’s initiation into the punishing and oppressive topography of the rainforest:

Nothing had prepared me for the terrain through which we slowly travelled. The rainforest felt magical and enchanted as long as I was sitting still, but the moment I began walking it became an obstacle course of steep razorback ridges, muddy ravines, fallen trees, slippery buttressed tree roots, impenetrable thickets of undergrowth, and a confusion of wildly twisting rivers running in every direction. All of this was in the shade of the interlocking branches of giant rainforest trees. I became disoriented. Tributary streams filled with moss green boulders cascaded into space from unseen jungle precipices, creating an eerie rising mist that filled the rainforest and kept us damp all day. In this giant green house the air was saturated with the smell of damp earth and rotting vegetation. I exhausted myself trying to remain upright. It was futile. (p. 64)

Semantically dense and vivid passages like this one which create and heighten the drama of entry thrive in both works. They reinforce the view that the rainforest is an undiscovered, bottomless, deep-space universe, an abyss of natural wonders, pungent smells, invisible dangers and unnegotiable barriers liable to make your stay as uncomfortable and miserable as possible. Herein lies the supreme irony: it is precisely its inaccessibility that renders the humid, bug-infested jungle so sublimely seductive. Developing the metaphor of infinite space, Hansen describes his re-entry into modern-day civilisation by employing diving imagery: ‘surfacing’, ‘cultural bends’. Deep in the interior of this
immensity, his physical response is figuratively described in the same pelagic terms:

I could feel my body becoming tense and alert. I felt tight. The only similar sensation I can relate to is the experience of swimming in the middle of the ocean where you know the water is many miles deep. The Kalimantan rainforest was like an unchartered, fathomless, green ocean, and I continued to nurture a healthy fear of the place. (p. 122)

The compelling notion of an ‘uncharted’ hinterland, a promising *terra nullius*, is perhaps the impetus for departure and throughout both journeys, the idea of discovering an unsullied Shangri-La within the bowels of this massive jungle presses the depressed, and jungle-weary travellers onwards. Blank spots on the maps and places marked with question marks and reliability warnings may cause alarm to the map-dependant traveller but they also appeal greatly to his sense of adventure in that the race to conquer the remote sectors of the huge Borneo rainforest that has, in his estimation, not yet been won. The temptation to conquer, name and therefore legitimise this marvellous new world is overpoweringly strong despite the traveller’s frequent demystification of his own fantasies. O’Hanlon daydreams, misty-eyed, about standing at the summit of a peak ‘Norgay-Tenzing like, breathing comfortably in [his] oxygen mask, unfurling, in the thin air, a Union Jack, and naming it Bukit Batu Baldy in honour of [his] companion’ (p. 110). (James Fenton is noticeably bald.) Although the signs of unease are there (the traveller envisions himself as the Sherpa guide not Hillary and deftly turns the fantasy into a joke at his companion’s expense) the rhetoric is glaringly colonial. What made the peak ‘most alluring of all’ was the fact that it ‘possessed no name’. He is also self-assured that what he hopes to achieve is a first in the history of rainforest navigation: ‘... we’re going to try and reach the Tiban mountains in the very centre of Borneo. Up the Rajang river. Up the Baleh to its source; and then we’ll march through the primary jungle. No one’s been since Mjoberg in 1926 — and he went in from the other side’ (p. 10). Although the writer views himself and his companion as hilarious misfits in the jungle and their excursion a farce in itself, and although he is wont to expose his own folly and ludicrousness, the fact remains that underlying the tongue-in-cheek declaration of his goal is a desire to appropriate a certain unnamed and unclaimed tract of mountain. Even the Iban guides have never permeated that part of the world and can bear witness to and verify the achievement of their employers and wards. Hansen’s original purpose was to become the first Westerner to discover an isolated Highland community in the Sarawak-Kalimantan border and pursue it he does to the bitter and painful end even whilst having to debunk his own fantasies that things would not have changed since his last visit six years earlier. The onset of extensive logging and other timber-related industries do more than upset Hansen’s bearings.

Michel Butor, in contemplating the kinship between travel, reading and writing, suggests that any new, unknown land is highly textualised terrain (‘already elaborated like a text’), that the traveller scans and surveys this land
with a conqueror’s impulse and that ‘even before the conqueror, the explorer
seizes with his language the land he crosses’. 4 This is true of many of the
literary journeys which O’Hanlon and Hansen are familiar with and which they
would like to emulate albeit with a large dose of humour and self-parody thrown
in. Their protagonists are no longer the sober, stiff-upper-lipped heroes of the
past but rather laughable adventurers beleaguered by a keen sense of their own
inadequacies and buffoonery. However, by and large, the discourse is still
fundamentally if not self-consciously colonialist.

To begin with, in many respects, the tone of these explorers’ stories is
confessional. Hansen’s narrator is remarkably transparent, sharing intimate
emotions, thoughts, aspirations and even his erotic longings with the reader.
Here is one particularly poignant outpouring from the psychiatrist’s couch as he
mourns the destruction of his shoes, ‘a memento of [his] journey’, by a mongrel:

In its revolting mouth was one last small fragment of my dear shoes. The dog hadn’t
been playing with the shoes; he had eaten them both. All that was left were two black
rubber soles covered with dog saliva and bite marks. I was heartbroken. Thousands
of leeches had dined in those shoes, and now they were gone. The shoes, in an absurd
way, had provided a sense of continuity to my trip. (p. 260)

Absurdity in the attachment of sentimental value to external objects is very
much a facet of jungle travel for these travellers. O’Hanlon demonstrates his
own fallibility by confessing that the ability to identify and affix labels to living
organisms (thus automatically assigning them value) gratifies him. Habitually
consulting his specialised books on Borneo wildlife, he confesses somewhat
sheepishly that

amidst the great press of unseen birds, the bewildering variety of clear calls and
background chatter from the jungled banks of the river, it was again absurdly
satisfying to have put a name to something, to have given its image firm and marked
brain space, to have taken possession of Hirundapus giganteus and stored its flight in
memory, to know that it was ‘Resident in Borneo in small numbers’ and that
Smythies, too, thought that ‘on the wing it has a queer heavy look’. (p. 93)

Semantically, words with negative connotations of ambiguity such as ‘unseen’,
‘bewildering’ and ‘background’ are offset by words denoting definition and
certainty such as ‘firm’, ‘marked’ and ‘know’. The act of naming nullifies the
void of meaning. Naming is tantamount to taking possession, clarifying and
‘storing’. The sentimental speaker here derives pleasure in discovering that he
and his mentor, Smythies, are like-minded, kindred spirits, and that he must
surely be on the right track scientifically.

I would like to posit that although anxious to discover something novel as in
the tradition of literary exploration, the traveller projected in the narrative treads
warily, equally anxious not to desecrate this relatively pristine and unsullied
world; he wants to leave no scratches behind for he has come in peace not
aggression. Does he secretly hope that this ennobling and conciliatory stance
might vindicate his intrusion? O’Hanlon prevents and forbids his guide from
killing a gibbon. ‘In a month or two the vegetation would cover the Iban shelter,
the crossed poles of our basha frame, the Ukit message sticks and shredded ferns on the mountainside, and, rightly, not a trace of us would remain' (p. 145). The invasion is temporarily exonerated in that the traveller will gaze happily upon his surrounds and name interesting phenomena but his sojourn will be as brief and unobtrusive as possible. his intentions sincere and unoffending and he will thereafter be easily forgotten. (In some of his melancholic moods and weaker moments. Hansen’s narrator has difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the memory of his walk in the jungle might be erased forever from the minds of his native friends.)

Hansen’s persona indirectly expresses a similar desire to be as restrained as possible: he would merely tip-toe through the jungle, anonymous and undetectable. The language evokes a sense of subdued progress, one which is physically exacting but at the same time congenial. The wilderness is regarded as an active agent, opening and surrendering itself readily to their canoes, making way, removing obstacles, forming instant pathways and ushering in their arrival. Hansen’s perspective of the jungle embracing the traveller and yielding to his approach is strikingly close to O’Hanlon’s. So is the wish for stealth.

The river continued to narrow, and soon the tree branches from opposite banks met overhead, creating one long, green corridor .... Poling our way along the inky green waterway. we glided upstream through quiet still-water bends in the river, where mats of fragrant white flowers had gathered, closing behind the stern of our 24-inch-wide dugout and concealing any sign of our passage. (pp. 57-58)

The inviting ‘long, green corridor’ is indeed enticing and renders the rainforest accessible while the surreptitious advance (where signs of encroachment are simply erased by nature herself) conjures the necessary suspense of breaching a forbidden place and foregrounds the non-disruptive character of the traveller. O’Hanlon’s description betrays the same ideas of a jungle encouraging and succumbing to the passage of the discreet interloper:

The river itself began to turn and twist, too, the banks behind us appearing to merge together into one vast and impenetrable thicket, shutting us in from behind just as the trees ahead stepped aside a meagre pace or two to let the river swirl down ahead. The outboard motor, manned by Leon and set on a special wooden frame at the stern of the canoe, pushed us past foaming little tributaries, islets, shingle banks strewn with huge rounded boulders, half-hidden coves scooped round by whirlpools. (pp. 31-32)

Although the river is convoluted and the thicket ‘impenetrable’, the trees ‘[step] aside’. This discrepancy is compounded by the suggestion that the travellers are almost involuntarily sucked into the jungle: ‘shutting us in from behind’, ‘pushed us’. Likewise, the ‘mats of fragrant white flowers...[close] behind the stern’, preventing retreat and exit.

All said. the rainforest remains utterly and necessarily unfamiliar territory in the imagination and experience of lettered, male. European travel writers despite the innumerable scientific expeditions mounted over the last two and a half centuries, volumes of research findings published and tomes of travel reportage
attempting to illuminate this green frontier. Perhaps it is this strangeness, real or imagined, that must be preserved at all costs for it presupposes a riddle that is crying out to be solved by the right 'stranger'. The notion of strangeness is two-pronged and cuts both ways. The white intruder is a stranger to these parts (which can be both to his advantage and to the detriment of his status) and the forest is strange, mysterious, inscrutable, throwing the ineffectual explorer completely off-balance and forcing him to relearn 'how to walk' (which proves a humbling experience but by the same token, proves the outsider a willing and worthy novice). Hansen is 'reduced to a childlike state, totally lacking in coordination and the ability to anticipate the ground surfaces' (p. 64). In this respect, the texts in question set themselves up for deconstruction for despite the apparent mystique of the forest, the sophisticated rhetoric implies that it is still a readable and conquerable place.

Consider the following extract where Hansen's jungle persona decodes the profuse flora and fauna and sees himself virtually engaged in amiable dialogue with the rainforest:

At times the jungle closed in, and I had to follow tunnels cut through the interwoven mass of barbed vines, aerial roots, fallen branches, and dense shrubbery. These tunnels were cut for the local people, so I was forced constantly to duck. Sometimes I crawled on my stomach. Massive dead tree trunks covered in blue-green moss that appeared to have been caught in midfall by the tangle of vines and branches leaned at fantastic angles. Glittering armies of black ants filed across the trail, disappeared into a mat of twigs and rotting leaves, and reappeared a few yards farther on as they marched over a fallen tree and out of sight. Enormous heart-shaped leaves, three feet across, curtained either side of the trail, and I felt as if I were a small bug crawling through some fantastic garden. The staccato bursts of insect sounds, rasping and vibrating, filled the thick, moist air until I couldn't hear my footsteps. I recognised the lilting call of the bulbul and the distinctive leathery wingflap of the hornbill. I called to the birds, and sometimes I could get one to follow me. They would stay with me for a mile or so, keeping just out of sight. When one bird lost interest, I would try to attract another. I found myself imitating nearly every sound that I heard. I was trying to talk with the jungle. (pp. 181–82)

Here are any number of examples of aestheticisation suggesting the bizarre, the chaotic and the beautiful: 'lilting', 'staccato', 'glittering', 'fantastic', 'tangle', 'mass of barbed vines', 'interwoven', 'dense'. The prose is variously factual, evaluative, analytic, observational, visual, auditory and tactile. It is also emotive and figurative. Dichotomies of difference punctuate the discourse: wild havoc and chronic irregularity as opposed to method and order. Although the diction in the quoted passage is mainly lay person in its scientific vagueness (the species of ants, trees, insects are not identified), there is the suggestion that the landscape can and will yield itself to an empirical reading or scientific description, that the mess can be tidied up so to speak. Words conveying lexical notions of measurability, symmetry and precision such as 'three feet across', 'distinctive', 'wingflap', 'heart-shaped', 'blue-green', 'vibrating' and 'recognised' hint at the scholarly slant even as the metaphorical one takes precedence. The ability to merge science and sentiment has been the forte of
many early travellers and Hansen illustrates this to a fault. The narcissistic ‘I’ is at the heart of this Borneo adventure: ‘I felt’, ‘I called’, ‘I recognised’, ‘I found’, ‘I crawled’. The speaker-traveller may strike one as the recipient of actions who exercises scant control over his progress (‘I was forced’, ‘I had to follow’) but he is also an active agent brimming with volition and purpose: ‘I could’, ‘I would’. One also infers from the discourse that the ‘tangle’ and the ‘density’ while suggesting the absence of order and symmetry, are not impossible to disentangle, to dissect, or even to communicate with. The ‘fantastic garden’ myth implies an embellished and classifiable variety of vegetation or an Edenic setting, a little dishevelled and maze-like perhaps, but teeming with as yet untagged plants. Nevertheless, ‘Adam’ is self-effacing, trivialising himself as a ‘small bug’ and subjecting himself to the demeaning act of ‘crawling’. The illusion of a labyrinthine jungle responding to the overtures of the speaker is achieved in statements like ‘I called to the birds’ and ‘They would stay with me’. Communication is effected by the simple act of imitation. Echoes from the exotic jungle are indeed a potent discursive strategy for the jungle marcher especially if the echoes are those of his own voice.

O’Hanlon’s flounderings are also given their due pride of place in the narrative. Groping and stumbling desperately in the relentless wild, Fenton and he appear pathetically impotent and ridiculous when compared to their composed and nimble-footed guides. ‘But James and I on the move, over-laden, unfit, too old, missing our footing, slithering down slopes, crashing into trees, shish-kebab’d by rattan thorns, panting like an engine shed, must have woken every tarsier, coast to coast’ (pp. 118-19). It is a foregone conclusion that in this endurance test, the traveller will emerge sore, traumatised and jungle-shocked but notwithstanding, jubilant and won over, despite or rather because of the sheer arduousness of jungle travel. The impression of physical clumsiness and cultural inaptitude, sometimes bordering on idiocy, is deliberately prevalent in O’Hanlon’s story. The brunt of jokes, pranks, insults and the unwitting source of much amusement for the locals, he indulges his hosts’ perception of him as an incorrigible clown. Hansen, on his part, ‘felt comfortable making a fool of [himself]’ (p. 144) and ‘would elicit great hoots of laughter from them’ (p. 128) without even trying. The buffoonery and repartee create the fanciful notion that the European and American outsiders are an entertaining and innocuous presence in the forest and therefore tolerable if not welcome in all their clumsiness and absurdity. They too are ‘marvels’. The ambiguous forest foundlings are duly adopted and feted by longhouse communities and at one critical point of the journey upriver, tragedy is averted when the Iban guide rescues Fenton from a watery grave.

Survival is a major and conventional theme in these literary travels. Hansen’s sufferings in the wild, both physical and emotional, while not designed to tickle, are pitiable enough to touch the hardest soul. Crippling foot sores, filth and extreme exhaustion do nothing to deter him. His tenacity is nothing short of astounding. Hansen is the sentimental and often lugubrious protagonist, a benign white presence who imbibes the ethos of the jungle so well that he is mistaken for a native Kenyah (a useful disguise) with his native sun
hat, *parang* and brown skin. ‘Things happen to him and he endures and survives. As a textual construct, his innocence lies less in self-effacement than in submissiveness and vulnerability, or the *display* of self-effacement.’ The reader is apt to commiserate with the defenceless and self-reproaching traveller as he lurches his way through the perceived confusion of vegetation, ridges, ravines and rapids. He confesses ardently that without his Penan guides, he would have perished. He views his relationship with them as that of a child and its protectors. Jungle illiteracy and jungle-sickness can be fatal.

So far, the discussion above part-illustrates the anti-conquest rhetoric as propounded by Mary Louise Pratt in her influential book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. In the tradition of Linnaeus and other natural historians of yore, these journeys are hardly colonial or racist conspiracies launched for the sinister purpose of imperial expansionism, subjugation and plunder. Neither are Hansen or O’Hanlon remotely concerned about the rise and fall of empires nor the establishment of trade routes, British or otherwise. However, the linguistic apparatus attributed to conquest narratives circumscribes the scope of the story-telling itself and the way these would-be jungle wallahs view and interpret their exotic surroundings. In true non-interventionist fashion, these journeys are personal, diplomatic, harmless, and to a large degree, sentimental accounts of the successes and failures of traversing an alien culture for the rainforest is indeed a way of life in itself. However, the resultant text bears an astute intertextual relationship with the host of writings which form the corpus of rainforest literature. Amazonian and Congo adventures, accounts of circumnavigation, mountaineering and other tales of conquest and high exploration written over the past three centuries have set conscious or unconscious parameters for travel writers today. Both men have read the same books (as the bibliographies testify), travelled vicariously along the same route (in real life, their itinerary overlapped in many places) and surely now face the same tremendous pressure to produce something original and therefore worthy to be inaugurated into the *oeuvre* of compulsory reading for any prospective rainforest explorer, armchair or actual. The laughter in the forest resonates with the parody of conquest but in some uncanny way, speaks the very same language of colonialism.

As such, the first characteristic that these two jungle navigators have in common is a profound sense of inadequacy or the *appearance* of inadequacy in grappling with the gruelling task at hand. At the outset, both express serious doubts and insecurities when faced with the monumental expedition ahead. Enlightenment in the form of the meticulous and extensive perusal of geographical, ethnographic, biological, botanical, anthropological and popular material did very little to dispel the anxiety. There is an unmistakable tone of self-parody in O’Hanlon’s lament: ‘The nearest I had ever come to a tropical rainforest, after all, was in the Bodleian Library, via the pages of the great nineteenth-century traveller-naturalists, Humboldt, Darwin, Wallace, Bates, Thomas Belt — and, in practice, a childhood spent rabbiting in the Wiltshire woods’ (pp. 2–3). Hansen, on the other hand, had basked in the bliss of ignorance of more recent developments in the region and had ‘fed [his] Borneo
fantasy with regular visits to the libraries of the University of California at Berkeley, where [he] had once been a student of industrial art and environmental design’.

One day while I browsed through the stacks, I happened upon a complete collection of Sarawak Museum Journals from 1912 onwards. Everything one would like to know about Sarawak is contained in those thirty-five wonderful volumes ....

In the library the pencil line that I effortlessly drew across the map connecting villages and traversing mighty mountains looked promising. It was not until I stood at the very edge of the Sarawak rainforest that I discovered most of the trails no longer existed and many of the longhouses were abandoned. It was then I also realised I had no idea what I was doing. (p. 31)

It is precisely this image of the benighted orang putih (white man), untutored and vulnerable in matters of the jungle, that Hansen and O’Hanlon succeed in evoking to an amazing degree.

The prodigious amount of reading may not prepare the traveller for the practical aspects and exigencies of the jungle march but the point is these are literary men (O’Hanlon reads avidly in the jungle, from the irrelevant Les Miserable of Victor Hugo to the relevant The Pagan Tribes of Borneo by Hose and McDougall) who like super sleuths have investigated the case thoroughly and are therefore intellectually equipped to enter this new planet regardless of the seeming foolhardiness of the whole enterprise. If anyone can do literary justice to the genius loci of the rainforest, they can. O’Hanlon sometimes flaunts an encyclopaedic and critical knowledge of the flora and fauna around him. He really has done his homework well. The contradiction is clear: research (maps, classifications, guides) proves almost redundant but is crucial nonetheless for misleading, dated and prejudiced information is better than no information whatsoever. Scholarliness and scientific curiosity justify the quest: Hansen describes his initial objective to reach the interior as a ‘masterful piece of scholarly lunacy based on anachronistic information and [his] own half-baked notions of Sarawak that had been gleaned from a twelve-day drunken visit six years earlier’ (p. 30). He may be insane and incompetent but the ‘lunacy’ is qualified and ameliorated by scholarship. O’Hanlon, a former Oxford academic, is well aware of the virtues of ‘scholarly instincts’ (p. 1), absorbing western rainforest literature like a madman before embarking uneasily but determinedly on his unusual and whimsical trip. There are also other benefits to be reaped from one’s erudite and learned background. To hack and insinuate his way into the jungle, O’Hanlon had the ironic shrewdness to arm himself with institutional support:

Under duress, Christopher Butler, then Senior Proctor at Oxford, had equipped us with a talisman of medieval-looking splendour (and a document which pleased me profoundly every time I sneaked a glance at it). Above the scarlet impression of the Great Seal of the University it proclaimed

To whom it may concern

This is to certify that

JAMES FENTON, M.A.(Oxon),F.R.S.L.
The Parody of Conquest in the Rainforest of Borneo

and

REDMOND O’HANLON, M.A., M.Phil. (Oxon)

are personally known to me, and are members of the University of Oxford. They are travelling in Borneo for Scientific purposes, and I would be grateful for any help and assistance you can give them. (p. 21)

The testimonial-cum-introduction document (reminiscent of colonial practices) performs its magic and eliminates the bureaucratic obstacle in Kapit, the starting-point of O’Hanlon’s itinerary. Why O’Hanlon derived boyish glee and gratification from his little subterfuge is an interesting point to ponder. There is his wry sense of humour. There is also the plausible implication that he is reassured by an ostensibly justifiable reason for being at the jungle’s fringe. The *raison d’etre* (the dubious but impressive ‘Scientific purposes’) mitigates the transgression of breaching the sanctity of the rainforest and he confidently and casually declares, tongue-in-cheek: ‘I want permission to go up the Baleh to its headwaters and then to climb Mount Tiban … James Fenton and I wish to re-discover the Borneo rhinoceros’ (p. 21). This potentially comic and flippant pronouncement (the rhino in question is said to be on the verge of extinction) focusses on the eccentricity of the intruders and in a covert way, exonerates the travellers from the direct responsibility of encroaching on foreign territory. O’Hanlon’s quirky sense of humour and enactment of high comedy in the jungle are anti-conquest. He is laughing his way out of complicity.

Hansen has a harder time fixing on any clear motive for setting foot in the rainforest and ruminates rather tiresomely on the matter with a great deal of soul-searching (the book is saturated with a great deal of introspective padding). The pioneering impulse spurs him to go where no man has gone, in search of the hypothetical and romantic highland valley separating Sarawak and Kalimantan, Indonesia, called the Apo Kayan-Kenyah country. In the same breath, he dismisses the whole imminence odyssey as merely a way of relieving the monotony of life in the city. His reasons tend to vacillate back and forth between the maudlin, the nostalgic, the poetic, the quixotic and sheer bravado.

Boredom — perhaps that is what made me return to Borneo? I have an extraordinarily low tolerance for boredom and routine.

Isabelle was right about there being no destinations. Travel is the act of leaving familiarity behind. Destination is merely a by-product of the journey. I guess what I wanted from my journey was a unique experience, something so far beyond my comprehension that I would have to step completely out of my skin to understand and become a part of my surroundings. That idea, more than anything else, had motivated me to pack my bag and leave San Francisco. The comfort and security of a successful business and a long-term relationship with a wonderfully talented, kind, and creative woman were not enough to hold me. (p. 44)

This ambivalence is an appropriate trapping of the non/anti-hero. He appears unsure of his intentions. He appears at a loss. He has rashly sacrificed almost everything for the sake of a novel experience only to confront despair and xenophobia. To some of the local inhabitants, he is suspicious, even mad to abandon the comforts of his civilisation and to subject himself to such torment.
and hardship. His intrusion in the rainforest is to be pardoned for he had no way of knowing what he was up against. In one particular settlement he is accused of being a *bali saleng* or a mischievous jungle spirit on account of his solitariness and oddity. The subject of severe prejudice, distrust and sometimes humiliation, Hansen nevertheless appreciates the fact that he is observed even as he surveys and evaluates the landscape and its contents. The illusion of reciprocity consoles the guilt-ridden invader. There is a telling episode in Hansen’s journey in which he had had to resort to telling an outright lie in order to bail himself out of a rather threatening situation. The jungle-dwellers had looked askance at him for solo wanderings in a volatile place populated with malevolent spirits who are to all intents and purposes, freakish and irrational. Cornered thus, Hansen has a brainwave and to explain his meanderings in the forest to an incredulous audience, he conveniently and resourcefully produces a mock amulet or spell-breaker in the form of a trinket, a stuffed banana pin. The villagers buy his story. Whatever the case, he is pleased to note that his walk in the forest has repercussions in the societies he encounters which, in turn, forces him to rethink his stance. The deceit itself signifies for Hansen the crossing over of a personal threshold (he is no longer a detached observer but a participant, albeit an untruthful one):

The decision to present the banana pin as a powerful charm not only helped save me in this situation, but also forced me to reconsider how I was responding to the people. I stopped being the observer and began to accept their supernatural world, and my journey was never the same. In that single moment I grew much closer to my experiences. (p. 192)

In the end, for Hansen, the fabrication is legitimised and extenuated; associated not with the gullibility of his listeners or his own seeming condescension but with his discernment of the ‘supernatural world’ of the native peoples.

‘Supernatural’ contrasts with the scientificity (mock or otherwise) of both these journeys. For O’Hanlon, science is the passport required to gain access into the green yonder. O’Hanlon clings to and quotes liberally from Bertram E. Smythies’ *The Birds of Borneo* (just one reference book in a long list) as if it were his life-support system and bible. There are pages in O’Hanlon’s narrative which are bald, scientific description and analysis. Hansen punctuates his report with the obligatory botanical taxonomy, playing the expected role of herboriser and classifier of plants as did his illustrious predecessors. The job of ‘collecting jungle products and medicinal plants of value’ (p. 31) is strictly outlined for commercial and traditional barter in the course of his trip but the conventional tendencies to infuse the journey with scientific significance are evident. The compulsion to name and identify specimens as if one were on a scientific fact-finding expedition is an eloquent indicator of genre restrictions and is sometimes incongruous in parts of the narrative: ‘There are still bands of nomadic hunters and gatherers who wander through the rainforest in groups of twenty-five to thirty-five to hunt wild pigs and search for sago palms (*Eugeissonia utilis*) from which they extract their staple food, sago flour’ (p. 29). The implication is that the credibility of such a fantastical journey depends,
to a significant degree, on the scientific verification and endorsement of the project. Science also endows the traveller with the authoritativeness and authenticity without which his presence in the middle of nowhere or elsewhere is negligible if not offensive to himself and to his post-colonial sensibilities.

In addition, the illusion of privilege and advantage is integral to the convivial traveller’s precarious position in this inhospitable and Other worldly environment. Passing through this timeless forest where to travel is to experience the primeval, the simple and the instinctive, he makes it his conscious duty to blend in and to win the approval of the inhabitants, even or sometimes especially at his own imagined expense. However, his objective is not mere acceptance but concession and immunity to traverse the forest of his desire. One of O’Hanlon’s guides, Dana, an Iban Headman no less, speaks the magic words which translated by Leon, another jungle pilot, is as follows: ‘He welcomes you … He say you have come far, from the country of our old Rajahs. And now we take you on a great journey to Bukit Batu Tiban, where we have never gone. But Dana he know of it. He says we will go there, because the spirits like you’ (pp. 27–28). The supernatural partiality and sanction are indeed fortuitous boons to the traveller for it appears that the gods themselves look with favour upon the whole operation. Rituals of appeasement centre around these travellers who are virtually given the task of invoking the gods extemporaneously. The ‘old Rajahs’, namely James, Charles and Charles Vyner, absolute monarchs who had advocated the ‘Brooke tradition’ of close and informal consultation in their rule of Sarawak, had paved the way for the steady stream of official and unofficial visitors to Sarawak. ‘You stayed in the longhouse and you lived with the people … we behaved like natives. We accepted Dayak conditions as they were’. The point is that unannounced visitors to Sarawak also grew to expect and to benefit from the friendly and benevolent longhouse treatment. Longhouse hospitality and goodwill became almost a given right.

In Hansen’s case, the assumption of the other as self comes to a head when he is made honorary Kelabit and Kenyah as appropriate new names are conferred upon him by his hosts: at journey’s end, he is Eric Hansen alias Rajah Kumis alias Asang Jalong. The local people like him. On occasion, the adaptable stranger not only earns the trust of his hosts but also becomes assimilated into the tribe, stranger no more but friend. One by one, obstacles are surmounted and the jungle seems to beckon and embrace the visitor; so much so that even though one did not truly belong, the thought of leaving the rainforest evokes intense feelings of abandonment, exile and dejection. ‘The jungle had just spat me out like a piece of old chewing gum’ (p. 173). Although the status of most favoured stranger is not actively solicited in both cases, the underlying desire to ingratiate oneself with the natives remains.

The implication seems also to be that the traveller’s adamant if not wilful pursuit of his obscure Shangri-La or El Dorado is vindication in itself for being in the jungle. His dogged persistence, his sacrifices, his exceeding discomfort, his agony of being in a strange land far from home and the incredible miles
logged to reach the forest all testify to the stranger’s merit. Surely these weary travellers have suffered enough adversities?

The bearing and exchange of gifts (Dana even offers his daughter’s hand if the foreigner would tarry long enough to warrant the union). skills (the white man has useful skills too especially pertaining to medicine, first-aid and disco dancing), talents, commodities (‘[John and Tingang Na] were also tempted by the illegal shotgun shells I was offering as wages’ [61]) and information (indigenous names of animals and plants are accorded their due place alongside their scientific Latin counterparts) are powerful tropes of the desired reciprocity and equality. The natives are highly visible protagonists conspicuously central to these narratives. no longer passive elements of the landscape relegated to the periphery of events and situations. They laugh loud and long when tickled. They mock gently and are gently mocked in return. The rhetoric and the information selected for narration reveal a seemingly mutual, symbiotic and equal relationship between obliging, protective host and apologetic, endearing guest. The travellers are pleased to note that their guides too, for all their skills and wits, are susceptible to leeches and mosquitoes. Hansen observes that ‘[he] wasn’t the only one who suffered that night. Bo’Hok and Weng didn’t have mosquito nets, so they nursed a smoky fire with damp wood to keep away sand flies and mosquitoes. The blinding cloud of hot, choking smoke kept [them] hacking and sneezing until dawn’ (pp. 155–56). ‘The Iban were also suffering, and we spent the next few minutes pulling leeches off our persons and wiping them on the trees,’ writes O’Hanlon (p. 118). The impression of bilateral cooperation and fellowship may appear to undermine the image of total dependence and surrender on the part of the white stranger (established and largely sustained throughout the discourse) but in actual fact does not. The tribal societies, finely attuned to the rhythms and dangers of the rainforest still hold the trump card. As long as the stranger is not in the position to argue, he finds relief in every tiny opportunity which may soothe his feelings of worthlessness. O’Hanlon unabashedly plays ‘doctor’ in the longhouses of Sarawak. In one such instance, he gratefully and generously ministers to an ailing old woman: ‘Her old eyes were bloodshot, her eyelids swollen. Feeling useful and needed. I pulled out my medicine pack and found the antibiotic eye drops. Smiling broadly she disclosed her gums. Not a tooth to be seen. I squeezed in some drops and she clapped her hands’ (p. 61). The applause resounds with the illusion of approbation.

In a related development. Peter Bishop’s contention in his book on Western travellers to Tibet over the centuries. The Myth of Shangri-La. is:

As Tibet became an intimate part of the Western psyche. the separation from it was felt as an exile. The journey to Lhasa was experienced on a depth level less as a going than as a returning. (p. 189)

In much the same way, the rainforest is the myth of a lost home which needs to be regained. The sense of a homecoming is explicit in Hansen’s discourse (though not so for O’Hanlon who viewed his stay in the jungle as a ‘two-month exile’): ‘During our stay I had a familiar sensation in my stomach, the one we
all get when we return to a familiar and loved place. I felt as though I had “come home” (p. 25). The *deja vu* of travelling to one’s source is also indicative of a certain rightness or propriety of the journey. What can be so wrong about going home?

As we have seen, *home* proves difficult territory for both O’Hanlon and Hansen whose struggle though the jungles of Sarawak, though highly caricatured and deliberately sardonic in places, reveals an ideological debt to the hegemonic European-Oriental mode of travel writing so prevalent in the past couple of centuries as well as in the numbered days of the twentieth.

NOTES

1. All references made to this text are sourced from Eric Hansen, *Stranger in the Forest: On Foot Across Borneo* (London: Abacus, 1990).
2. All references to this text are sourced from Redmond O’Hanlon, *Into the Heart of Borneo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).
5. In twentieth-century travel writing, anonymity and camouflage are conditions and conscious strategies of travel inasmuch as the traveller fancies himself or herself an ephemeral presence; it also becomes a means of self-preservation. Hansen’s speaker is known chiefly and vaguely as ‘Tuan’, the equivalent of ‘sir’ but redolent of ‘white master’, something which troubles him; whereas Redmond and James are addressed as ‘Redmon’ and ‘Jams’, a propitious distortion of names and therefore, identities.
6. Greenblatt has argued this point: that ‘reverse wonderment’ betokens the intelligence of the natives and not their naivete, thus I feel, sparing the visitors the indignity of being laughed at by inferior-minded souls. The concept of the marvellous is not attached to things grotesque or bizarre but instead captures the character and spirit of an entire place, ‘a place of surprising and intense beauty’, the ‘landscape of delight’ (p. 77). To be marvellous then is advantageous, an enviable position to assume.
8. Incidentally, letters of introduction such as the one Odoardo Beccari presented to H.H. Sir Charles Brooke written by the ruler’s uncle, Sir James Brooke, the first European monarch of Sarawak, are powerful tools for opening doors and establishing authority in the eyes of the natives.
The evening was already upon Calcutta, light sucked from the sky at an alarming rate. The first bats left their trees and flitted about in a purposeless way. Moths blundered into candles. In the fading wastes above the town the Pole Star hung, gripped invisibly by God’s fingers, incandescent with strange light. A full moon appeared beside it. In the house there was bustle and a heightened sense of expectation not normally to be found.

Rigid upon a stool Sati Edwards twisted glass bangles upon her wrist and smoothed down her muslin skirt. Before her a servant sat cross-legged upon the floor, buffing up some bits of silver. A pile of candles were stacked upon a table, before which argued two more servants. The new bearer, a Moslem, refused to touch the candles, saying they were made of pig fat. The chief steward, who had worked for a time in the house, protested that the candles were made from the fat of an enormous fish, especially imported from France. He rapped the box importantly, with its yellowing picture of a whale.

Sati sensed her stepfather observing her as he stood beside the window. His grey eyes resembled the monsoon sky and had the effect of a downpour upon her, shutting her into herself. It was not hard to guess his thoughts as his gaze strayed from her to the table. He was trying to assess how many should be burned to create the right atmosphere for the séance. Too many would generate a climate of fear that might drive the curious away. Fabian Demonteguy was normally frugal with the use of the spermaceti since they were not only more expensive than local wax candles, but must be ordered from France a year in advance of his needs. Tonight he would not spare their use, nor tolerate her reluctance to be a part of his plans. She must perform as instructed. The candlelight grew steadily stronger as darkness settled outside. Sati heard her stepfather clear his throat and turn back to the room.

‘The Governor’s wife will be coming,’ Demonteguy reminded his wife.

Rita Demonteguy examined her appearance in a tarnished mirror, her face held close to the glass. The red brass of henna, lit by the candlelight, flamed within her hair. Ignoring Demonteguy’s advice she refused to dress or powder it in the White Town fashion. If he ever returned with her to France, she knew he feared her creating a stir. At times she caught his eyes upon her, as if already scenes entered his mind that made him shudder with distaste. In retaliation she shook back her fiery hair.
'Nobody thinking well of that Mrs Drake,' Rita announced, still observing herself in the blotched mirror. The blemish in the glass disturbed her, moving over her like a disease. However hard she exhorted the servants to polish the stains remained, untouchable. Behind her reflection floated the image of her daughter, a further blight upon her satisfaction. The girl’s eyes followed her every move.

'Emily Drake is a lonely woman. Such women seek their own affirmation. But is our Governor regarded with any more respect?' Demonteguy asked, then ordered more candles to be lit. The argument at the table now appeared to be settled. The head steward handled the candles and the bearer carried a taper which he lit from a candle the head steward held in order to light further candles.

Sati avoided her mother’s gaze in the mirror. The sight of her here in the Frenchman’s house, and the nature of the glances that passed between them filled her with confusion. She turned on the stool, shrinking from Rita’s appraisal. A pink ribbon tied up her hair; tight European clothes constricted all movement. Beneath her dress a bodice and skirt, set with bamboo, were hooped about her like a cage. Her pulse seemed to slow, her breath became shallow and her spirit fled deep into hiding. She stared at the room before her and felt only further constriction.

She hated her stepfather’s house in White Town, filled with useless objects. Mirrors reflected everywhere, filling the house with inaccessible worlds. They deceived through vanity and drew the unwary; they caught and closed away in darkness the secrets of her soul. Their pools of sinister light threw her own ghost before her. Danger was also beneath the chandelier from which crystallised shards appeared forever about to fall. The silk covered chairs of fashionable design Fabian Demonteguy had brought from France but the marble-toped console and the inlaid commode had been supervised to his taste in the local bazaar. The house was a neat one storied affair with a veranda and a small garden. Besides furniture strange flowers had also been imported from France. These now grew in a sickly fashion, cajoled from an alien soil. Sati remembered her grandmother’s hut in Black Town about which vegetation thrust unasked from the fertile earth. She turned to gaze out of the window, spuming the vase of ephemeral flowers before her. Across the fading shapes of White Town she could see the river and Fort William.

The garrison had been built in those days when a fort was worth more than an ambassador. Although it no longer rose threateningly, with the dusk it regained some menace. The town was preparing for the night but whatever the nature of White Town’s preliminaries, it was the bustle of Black Town that came Sati’s way. Her stepfather’s home, in an unfashionable area of Calcutta, was situated near Black Town’s perimeter; the smell of dung fires, frying spices and effluent assailed it. Clanking pans, crying babies, women’s voices and the howl of a dog echoed against the sky. Besides the odours of Black Town the reek of the Salt Lakes drifted into the room. Newcomers, not yet acclimatised to the stench of Calcutta, constantly retched. Women sickened politely behind
posies of jasmine, their stomachs turned inside out. The open drains and noxious mud flats, mixed with the rot of dead fish tossed up each day on the tide, did not disturb Sati Edwards. Nor did it disturb her stepfather. Fabian Demonteguy was not a man of the East India Company, which was lit from within by its own fierce light. He was an interloper, who must forage about as best he could for his own illumination. Calcutta treated his breed with distaste.

Demonteguy turned to assess the room and was forced at last to observe his stepdaughter. The girl was from his wife’s brief marriage to an English sea captain fifteen years before. Demonteguy frowned as he stared at Sati. If he could have arranged the evening without her he would have done so but, she was the pivot upon which it must turn.

‘Tonight you appear most acceptable,’ Demonteguy complimented begrudgingly. He stared at Sati intently, wondering as always why the girl could not have inherited her mother’s light, honeyed skin. Instead, perversely, she reflected upon him all of Black Town’s intensity.

‘You will perform as instructed,’ he ordered, suddenly fearing she might yet slip from his grasp. She gave him the feeling she might have that ability. The girl looked up and for a moment he met her amber eyes, disconcerting in their clarity. Those feline eyes and wild tortoiseshell hair, burnished and streaked as if it held part of the sun, was all she had inherited from her English father.

‘Good money has been spent on that dress,’ he reminded her, assessing the silk he himself had chosen and seen cut by a tailor from France. The raggedy salwar kameez Sati had arrived in from Black Town he had, without delay, ordered thrown away. Besides Sati’s new dress Rita had also required a suitable outfit. He had purchased a waistcoat for himself as well; the occasion seemed to demand it. Already, a considerable sum had been spent on the evening.

Sati cringed before Demonteguy’s scrutiny. The cage of bamboo beneath her dress held her now like a vice. Its wooden pinchers squeezed from her the last shreds of identity. She had seen nothing wrong with her Indian clothes and protested their aggressive disposal. Her grandmother had opened the old trunk that stood in her hut, for she knew the importance of the White Town visit. She rarely lifted the lid of the heavy chest filled with the bric-a-brac of her life. From its depths she pulled out an ancient outfit, worn long before in her Murshidabad days. The soft silk and tarnished embroidery, smelling of damp and incarceration, slipped easily over Sati. For a moment her grandmother’s eyes had filled with tears. The dress had been given her by the Raja in whose zenana she had lived. Sati knew she did not cry for the Raja but only for the years she had lost. The silk flowed like water over her body and swung about her as Sati turned. She seemed to grow tall with the splendour.

Yet, on her arrival in White Town, her mother had announced that Mr Demonteguy was disturbed by her appearance. A dress of European design, more suitable to life in the settlement, had already been bought for her. Rita’s hands were hard and her breath sour as she ripped the old clothes off her daughter. The soft Murshidabad silk was rolled into a ball and carried away by a servant. Sati cried out and received a smart slap from Rita. She thrashed about
in her mother’s arms but the clothes were already gone. As she watched a door shut firmly behind them. It was as if her own skin were being discarded, like the gauzy peelings of a snake, swept up with the dust and leaves. Except that she was left skinless, unable to make the passage from one body to another. Before her mother she fell suddenly silent and stepped into the strange European clothes that were offered, which were then lashed tightly about her. At last she turned to the mirror. It showed her only a distant figure she did not recognise. A crack seemed to open within her dividing her soul along a fine line. A sense of desolation had filled her then and remained with her still. She appeared neither one thing nor the other, neither Indian nor European, but something on her own. Now, upon the stool in Demonteguy’s home she heard her mother speaking.

‘People avoid Mrs Drake. They only accept official invitations, other times they turn their backs upon her. They say also she is country born. In Surat or Bombay.’ Rita Demonteguy stepped away from the mirror, picking up the conversation. She tossed it lightly, like a ball, to shatter Mrs Drake. For a moment she saw no paradox in assuming White Town scorn.

‘It is one thing to be country born another to marry a brother-in-law. That is no better than incest.’ Demonteguy gave a laugh. ‘It is said Mrs Drake’s father settled a good sum upon each of his daughters. Drake will have got the lot, first from one sister and then from the other. It shows the character of the man. No morals to hinder his greed.’

‘Nothing is wrong with being born in India instead of Europe. Who can help where they are born?’ Rita’s voice grated with annoyance as she came up against hard facts. A battle that day with her mother, surrounded by Black Town’s pigs, chickens and hawkers of fruit and vegetables, unsettled for a moment the future that seemed so certain in her new husband’s home.

She had gone with Demonteguy to collect Sati from Black Town and found her attired in Jaya Kapur’s old clothes. Rita’s terse comments had angered old Jaya and she had refused to let the girl go. She had clung to Sati, battling desperately for her granddaughter upon her own Black Town doorstep. Sati was tugged back and forth between the two women. Jaya Kapur screeched abuse at her daughter, Rita Demonteguy let loose unrepeatable words at her mother. Demonteguy waited some distance away, fanning himself with a handkerchief. At intervals he pressed the square of scented linen firmly to his nose. Sati’s cries and the shrill determination of both women had gathered a crowd who all attempted loud and active intervention. A pig interrupted its rooting to watch, chickens stopped pecking, the vegetable vendor lowered his basket of wares. Demonteguy, in embarrassment, had removed his two palanquins to the seclusion of some coconut palms beside a filthy pond. Women, washing clothes in the muddy water, raised their heads and stared. The reality of absorbing his new wife’s origins caused Demonteguy to sweat profusely. He had never visited his mother-in-law’s thatched hut, never heard from his wife the vulgar guttural notes she now tossed about in abandonment, never entered the labyrinthine depths of Black Town before. The accumulation of all these harsh facts made him feel quite faint. Two mangy pariah dogs started to copulate before him, oblivious to the scene, uttering high cries of ecstasy. He watched them in
distracted interest. Nubile in his home, wanton in his bed, his wife blinded him to everything about herself but the ripe willingness of her body.

Eventually, the screeching subsided; some settlement seemed to be made. Accompanied by the curious crowd Rita and her mother then turned to approach Demonteguy. To his horror, her hand still locked in her granddaughter’s, Jaya had climbed into his palanquin. The squash was so great and the odour of his mother-in-law so intense, that he was forced to vacate his own conveyance to walk behind the runners, leaving the palanquins to the three women. He had crossed the Maratha Ditch back into White Town with inexplicable relief.

‘And why is to marry a dead sister’s husband not a proper thing to do? This I do not understand. Mrs Drake is lucky the Governor married her. It must have been a charitable act. Just look at her; so dried up. No bosom, no backside. No nothing,’ Rita announced turning back to the mirror. ‘In India such a marriage is not a bad thing to do.’

‘We are not talking about Black Town customs. Now you are part of White Town,’ Demonteguy snapped, watching as the last candles were lit.

Sati listened in surprise. A distant cousin of her grandmother’s had married three sisters of the same family one after another as they died, the first in childbirth, the second from cholera. The third and present wife was still alive. But, said her grandmother, should misfortune overtake her also, there was still a fourth unwedded sister who was already nearly twelve. There had been only praise from old Jaya for the dutiful response of this man to the plight of his wife’s unmarried sisters. He had demanded successively less for each new dowry and most important, said her grandmother, the women were wed and not left, a shameful weight, upon their father’s hands. Sati frowned in confusion. No bosom, no backside, no nothing. The image of a paper cut-out came into her mind.

Before the glass Rita Demonteguy adjusted the gems at her neck. Her breasts and hips, proportioned like a Hindu statue, were laced into a dress Demonteguy had ordered from a French tailor recently arrived in the settlement. Diamonds circled her in cold fire and flashed upon her fingers. In the freckled mirror her dark eyes, ever mysterious to Demonteguy, were hard when meeting those of her daughter. Sati looked away. Tonight in this room she knew she must climb the steep, slippery slope of approval. The only comfort was that her grandmother had accompanied her into White Town. Jaya Kapur sat hidden on the back veranda with orders not to intrude. Sati was comforted by the movement of a curtain and a sudden glimpse of her grandmother. The old woman pulled an encouraging face then let the curtain fall.

Straight-backed chairs had been set in a semi-circle about an armchair. Already, to Sati, the waiting seats filled the room with expectation. Perhaps nothing would happen. Perhaps the spirits that came to her would refuse to appear at such a debased summoning. For that was what this séance was, debased. These depressing thoughts were furthered by Demonteguy. He paced about considering the placement of the chairs and the number of candles to be lit. His profession was opportunity, and this had now spread to include herself.
‘Do not be nervous. I have shown you how to do it.’ Demonteguy turned to Sati. He bent and took her hand. She looked down at the bony, red knuckles gripping her flesh and immediately drew back.

‘The room looks well enough,’ Rita admonished, breasts spilling over her dress like a plate of blancmange. She clung to her husband’s arm, laughing up into his face, anxious to erase the afternoon’s unpleasantness in Black Town. He patted her hand absentmindedly, his attention upon the event ahead, but then found a moment to feast his sight upon the succulence trembling so near him. His eyes in the candlelight were bright as a rat’s behind his long nose. He exchanged a lecherous glance with his wife; she giggled and looked away. Demonteguy returned to arrangements.

‘Everything is in the details. Word flies around quickly here in Calcutta. Failure with our first enterprise could end a profitable game.’ He assessed the room, anticipation upon his loose lips. ‘A séance does not demand too much illumination. We do not need so many candles.’

‘Snuff some out before we start. How will guests enter the house in darkness?’ Rita admonished.

‘The effect of a sudden darkening of the room will be most dramatic.’ Satisfaction spread over Demonteguy’s face as he pictured such a moment.

A bangle snapped between Sati’s fingers, collapsing in fragments in her lap. She stared at the bits of broken glass and the bead of blood on her wrist. Perhaps this was an omen; perhaps she too would crack in the midst of one of her attacks. This was the word used by Demonteguy to describe the sudden melting of her mind, for the entry into her of personalities who juggled for room to be heard.

In the beginning these presences had been vague, refusing to clearly reveal themselves. Then Durga had appeared. Sati had only to turn her head to see Durga watching from the shadows of foliage or the rafters of a room. She sensed her moving on the edge of time, drifting always near her. Whenever Durga came to claim her a wildness burned up her spine pulling her into a darkness from which she remembered nothing. Her stepfather’s use of the word attack implied some violence but there was nothing of that in what happened to her. Only the opening of a door and the entering of immensity. Upon her return to mundane life her soul seemed to cling to her body by no more than a fragile thread. If it snapped she knew she might float off into a limitless world and never return to reality. Like the strands of a cobweb blown free on the wind. A gust of fear passed through her.

With an effort she returned her attention to the empty chairs before her. Their shapely guilt legs resembled Demonteguy’s shin of silken hose. Excitement continued to spark between her mother and her stepfather. Their voices were high with tension as they moved about the room in a ballet of anxiety. Yet more candles were lit and then snuffed out, a pillow was placed upon the armchair where Sati was to sit. A small table with three upturned coloured glasses stood before the chair.

On his last visit to France Fabian Demonteguy had attended a séance in Paris and wished the performance in his home to correspond to that event. He had
produced three tumblers of blue, red and yellow glass and spent much time instructing Sati. People were to ask her questions, she was to tell what she saw in the glasses. In the blue glass for example, she might see the sky, a journey upon the sea or a catastrophic event upon the horizon. Blue was easy to remember; sea, sky or the occult clouds of mystery. The red glass could show blood, disease, a fiery accident, but mostly blood. There was no problem with the amount of gore, Demonteguy advised. People liked blood, became riveted to it, and would always come back for more. The yellow glass could represent anything she wished according to the question. A woman in a yellow dress, a golden bird, the pussy juices of an ailment etc. She must let her mind play upon the questions, let her imagination soar. If something real entered her mind, so much the better. If not she must invent it.

Demonteguy had sat himself down before the three glasses to guide her in the matter. They had acted out the séance many times. Under his tutelage her prophecies, in desperation, spiralled to baroque proportions. All the while she had been conscious of Durga beside her, full of sarcastic snarl. Yet, in spite of seeing her in the midst of more than one attack, Demonteguy refused to realise her visitor was real and would not be contained in a few coloured glasses. Afterwards, he told her, there would be a collection of money. People would give according to their fear or satisfaction. If they felt neither emotion, nothing would persuade them to open their purse strings.

Already, there were sounds of arrival before the house. The night vibrated beyond the door, like a scuffling animal preparing to break in. Strange voices instructed palanquin bearers and made inquires of the chowkidar. Disembodied sounds floated to Sati. Then, footsteps and the sudden appearance of a strange face cracking open her world.

Although, in the end, the crowd was not large the room seemed unbearably full. Breath, voices, heat and candle flames beat their separate wings about her. Sati’s head began to hurt. Demonteguy greeted his guests with fawning smiles. His paunch fell forward against his waistcoat buttons each time he affected a bow. Beside her husband Rita went stiffly through the motions of welcome, as instructed by Demonteguy, concentrating on her part. If she failed to maintain the proper White Town demeanour things would go hard for her. Already, she refused to dress her sumptuous hair, but shook it free as if she were a nautch girl. For this concession there was a price to pay. In the silence of the night Demonteguy would remember the eyes of other men upon her and demand an unusual selection of conjugal rights.

All this was unknown to Sati. She only saw her mother and Demonteguy make extravagant welcome at the door. Wine was passed around, the glasses shaking on a tray held by an ancient bearer. Candles blazed upon cut glass, wine cradled like blood in the bowls. She drew back in her chair. A play was enacted before her. There was much strutting and nodding and the clear stream of talk. There were the long, colourful tails of parrot-coloured skirts, the matted fuzz of wigs and the loop of powdered curls. The unfamiliar European faces, chiselled as marble, whiskered like cats, raw-skinned or slack as cloth, seemed all to be
made of the same floury dough she had once seen a baker kneading. These people were like the almonds her grandmother soaked and divested of their tough brown skins, to lay naked upon a plate.

Gradually, the room filled up. The great skirts of the women billowed over stiff hoops. Some rearrangement of chairs was needed to allow them space to sit. The candlelight flickered upon lace ruffles, the silver buttons of a waistcoat, the moist and expectant eyes. It nested in the hollows of bones, changing shapes, contorting features. People spoke in low voices, as if there had been a death. Women exchanged words behind their fans, eyes resting upon her, blowing Sati backwards down a tunnel to view her from a distance. She touched the gold amulet at her neck threaded upon a black string. Her stepfather had urged her to change it for a string of pearls but she had refused. For once her mother had supported her, knowing the importance of the object. Within its tiny case, rolled up tight, was an invocation to the Goddess.

One by one the White Town people seated themselves before her. How would she see into their ferenghi souls? These people by their absence of colour appeared as disembodied as a company of ghosts. She thought of Pagal, the albino, made freakish in Black Town by his alabaster skin. He hid from the sun as did these people. His pink rabbity eyes, bleached lashes and hair were also to be found upon the ferenghi. Would they claim the albino as their own if he went to live with them? It seemed suddenly confusing. The dark mass of Black Town rose up in her mind then as powerfully embodied, anchored by their colour to the warm, dung-smelling earth.

To calm herself Sati thought of her grandmother banished by Demonteguy to the back veranda. She imagined her sitting in a soft heap, the tire of her midriff bulging out between her breasts and hips like the stuffing from a patty. She saw as well her thin plait of hair gleaming in the candlelight, its grey beginnings and hennaed end saturated with musty oil. Each night Sati was required to oil it, each night she slept beside her grandmother lulled to sleep by the greasy aroma. There was no way to connect old Jaya Kapur to this room. Sati wished to run to her, to return to the safety of the thatched hut that until now they had shared. She touched the talisman at her neck again and knew The Goddess would keep her safe. On the veranda, her grandmother must also be turning her prayer beads, imploring the divinity’s protection.

Sati was suddenly conscious that attention had flicked away from her. There was a disturbance in the room, like a breeze across a field of wheat. A rustle of comments too low to unravel greeted the arrival of the Governor’s wife. Emily Drake nodded to people and received a stiff return. There appeared a separateness about her in the crowded room. Her unpowdered hair, drawn back into untidy loops, was pinned about her crown. The décolletage so favoured by Rita Demonteguy was not for the Emily Drake. She wore a modest, lace edged neckerchief, crossed over at the waist. Her thin face had the worn and polished look of stones from the river distressed by strong currents. She settled nervously on a chair beside Lady Russell and stared at Sati who returned her gaze.
Thoughts tumbled about in Emily Drake’s head. Already, she knew she should not have come, especially so soon after her confinement. At this time a woman did not cavort about town alone, certainly not at night and for so dubious a reason. Already, she was fodder for tomorrow’s gossip. It was always a mistake to follow an impulse. There was hardly an occasion she could remember when good had come of such behaviour. And yet, a compulsion beyond the normal had driven her to this room. She thought of her child asleep in his cradle and knew she was here for his safety. She had waited until her husband set out on his evening walk. He had announced he would leave the precincts of Fort William to visit Chief Magistrate Holwell. Immediately, upon his departure she had summoned the palanquin bearers. As Fort William drew distant behind her she noticed the swollen moon. As she stared up into the sky that great bowl of feminine light had given her the strength to follow her impulse, irrational as it seemed. Her heart had been in a flutter. But for what she wondered now? A half-caste girl from Black Town? She stared in surprise at Sati. The reality of the situation broke suddenly open, like a pod of ripe peas, before her.

She had expected somebody older. What could this shrinking, sallow-skinned child impart of importance? It was madness to have come. Perhaps her mind was beginning to shred like worn linen, dissolving before the disparagement of the town. There was not a moment in the day when she was impervious to Calcutta’s taunts and disregard. She knew now this girl would offer nothing. She met Sati’s amber eyes and held them for a moment. To her surprise something stilled within her, as if a secret passed between them. There appeared to be a heightening in the room. Her breath seemed to die in her throat. Emily Drake turned in agitation to Lady Russell, but she chewed on some aniseed to sweeten her breath. She sought the eye of Mr Dumbleton, but he scratched his head beneath his wig. The candles flickered no more than before. Nothing appeared to have changed. Yet something had moved within Emily Drake. She no longer knew why she had come, what rare urgency had impelled her. If she could she would have departed. The wing of a passing moth brushed her face, the air stirred strangely about her.

Sati’s pulse beat faster, she gripped the frame of the stool in fear, for the performance was now upon her. She must blow soul into the faces of her audience, she prayed for Durga to come. Without Durga nothing was possible. Already the room had quietened, every eye was now settled upon her. Rita took her arm, her fingers hard in warning and pushed Sati down into the armchair. The three coloured glasses stood waiting before her. Already moths had flown in and clustered about the candle flames. The beating shadows of their wings stretched upon the walls. Suddenly, upon orders from Demonteguy, the servants extinguished most of the candles. Night fell dramatically upon the assembled crowd; a smell of burnt wicks filled the air.

Now that the room was almost dark Sati saw that some fireflies had settled upon a wall. They glowed before her in three points of light above the head of the Governor’s wife. Below, in the dimness Mrs Drake stared, her face drawn
into shadowy valleys, the ridge of her nose and the plateau of her cheeks caught in a cross of light. Her eyes had a glassy appearance, anxious and severe.

Sati bent forward, covering her face with her hands. If she cut away the world before her some strange force propelled her inwards. The momentum increased until she arrived before an inner door. There she floated into endlessness, suspended in a timeless world. There she was both found and lost. And it was there that Durga waited.

Slowly then, she raised her head from her hands and leaned back in the chair. She was no longer part of the room. All she saw now were the fireflies, their fluorescence brightening then dimming, as if they breathed in unison with her, fuelled by her own throbbing pulse. And Durga had come after all, to guide her from one realm to another. Durga, the bloody-minded, fierce as a warrior, ready for battle, full of fierce mettle. Her predatory force filled the room. She stamped her foot and her wildness was a dance Sati must follow. Durga knew what to do, what must be said, where the dance would lead. Sati gave a sigh of relief and relinquished herself. All tension ebbed away. Durga settled into her veins, deep as instinct, liquid as knowledge dredged up from forgotten lives. Immediately, her breath became shallow and her eyes stared fixedly, as if caught unawares by death. A murmur spread around the room at this strange transformation. Rita and Demonteguy exchanged a look of satisfaction.

‘She is ready.’ Demonteguy whispered. He turned his head towards his audience to invite a first query through the glasses. Before he could speak a loud voice rang out.

‘Emily. Emily.’ The spirit sailed right through Sati, leaping from her body. It spewed out of her as uncontrollably as a stream of projectile vomit. Durga had allowed it to manifest, knowing the needs of the moment. The figure circled the room as Sati watched sleepily and then took a clearer shape. It made its way without hesitation towards the Governor’s wife.

‘Ah! It is for her you come then?’ Durga growled at the strange spirit and the reverberations trembled through Sati’s veins. Durga was fitted tight inside her, filling her fingers, expanding her belly, seeping through her veins.

‘Emily,’ the figure repeated, continuing to speak through Durga although it stood behind Mrs Drake’s chair. It flexed up and down upon its toes, impatiently, like a dancer.

Emily Drake was split open by terror. She looked around for the invisible presence. About her there was only the night and the flicker of countless shadows. A whimper of fear curled from her. She had entered a world between worlds and its lush, wild shape closed around her.

‘Give her your name then,’ Durga ordered the spirit, enjoying the shock of the audience at her own obnoxious presence. A hoarse, pulpy sound always emerged from Durga, unlike Sati’s hesitant tone. The voice of an old singer prostitute, worn bare by shameless projection.

‘I am Jane. Her sister, Jane.’ The spirit laughed in a knowing way. She floated up to the ceiling and settled near the fireflies. The insects grew larger until their pulsating light lit up the room, lending their energy to Sati, keeping her alive while Durga was manifest.
‘What does she want?’ Emily Drake half-rose from her chair and then sank back again. She glared into the night at the invisible presence, twisting this way and that on her chair.

Tension filled the room. People sat forward upon their seats, faces contorted in fear. Durga threw back her head and laughed. The sound stirred the air about the spirit, who became even more excited.

‘Thief.’ Jane screamed, long hair swirling about in a gleaming membrane. She settled again near the fireflies, shifting angrily above Emily’s head.

‘I have taken enough of such accusations.’ Emily Drake struggled up again from her chair, looking around defiantly. Jane took no notice but continued to wheel about, hair swimming freely around her.

‘Why have you come to torture me? Leave me my child, that is all I ask. You took the first; it was him you wanted. Is that not enough?’ Emily’s voice soared upon shredded notes. She refused to relinquish another child to her sister’s ghost. She did not care now who knew of her fear.

‘Who is to judge what is enough?’ Jane inquired.

Durga pumped out a hoarse laugh, her eyes brighter than the fireflies. She liked the spirits she summoned up to enjoy themselves on their brief visits to this tangible world.

‘Leave me in peace.’ Emily’s voice tumbled from its brief peak, splintering as it fell. She stood up as if she would leave Demonteguy’s house. The room seemed stalked by unseen predators; the air was sharp as glass. Beside her Lady Russell took her hand and pulled her down again.

Rita and Fabian Demonteguy exchanged looks of alarm. Sati was not meant to act in this manner. Whose was this deep, authoritative voice, so adept at abstract thought?

‘I told her exactly what to do,’ Demonteguy hissed into Rita’s ear, anger making him splutter. ‘Your mother has put her up to this nonsense. It’s her usual Black Town hokum pokum.’

‘What about the glasses?’ Rita whispered, seeking some way to control the situation. She shivered in terror. Things seemed to slither about the room. Dark, formless apparitions waited to attach themselves to her. Demonteguy stepped forward determinedly.

‘What about the glasses?’ he whispered, bending over Sati.

‘What about the glasses?’ Durga answered sweeping them from the table with a single crashing stroke. Glass splintered and skidded beneath the chairs. Women lifted their skirts and drew back with choked cries. Men allowed themselves small guttural sounds of fear. Durga lifted an arm and at her summons a bat flew into the room. It soared up to hit the ceiling, then dived to the candle with a vicious squeak, wings beating like flaps of pewter. Its shadow swelled over the walls. A servant rushed forward with a broom to chase away the creature. In the chair Sati stirred and Durga’s laughter immediately faded.

Half hidden behind a curtain, old Jaya Kapur watched the scene, soft flesh plaited tight in horror. This was not Sati. The voice did not belong to her granddaughter. She could not speak in this deep tone, did not know such
complicated thoughts, such difficult mocking words. She spoke like the ferenghi themselves. There was another creature inside her, a ferenghi devil. As soon as this terrible evening was over she would go again to the temple, Jaya decided. She turned her prayer beads faster, muttering in a desperate whisper an invocation to the Goddess.

It had been clear to Jaya for some time, since the moment these strange manifestations had begun to appear several years before, that her granddaughter was possessed. She had gone immediately then to a priest at the Kali Mandhir and he had taken money to exorcise the demon. Eventually, after some sessions with a brushwood whip, through which Sati screamed in a hair-raising way, he declared the devil gone. Now, Jaya saw that her instincts were right, priest or not, the man was not to be trusted in any matter. And neither was Demonteguy. He had stirred up that creature once more in Sati. Rita should never have married him. He would destroy them all. She must talk the whole thing over with her cousin, Govindram.

She stared from the veranda at the full, ripe moon. In the month no day was more auspicious than this particular day. The full cup of the moon held a confusion of seed that would sow itself as it wished. Man could resort to nothing but prayer. Jaya gave a sigh. The future swell heavily before her as she turned her prayer beads. Yet she knew that when the Goddess gave trouble she also gave strength to bear the trial. In this thought Jaya trusted. She had not been failed in the past.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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KUNAPIPI

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