The finishing Touch

Deena Padayachee

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol13/iss1/25

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
The finishing Touch

Abstract
The shebeen was full of raucous people having a great old time. But Satha noticed that his friend Muthu didn't look too happy. The old man had come into the shebeen a few minutes ago and simply plopped down in a chair. He had taken his first drink in one gulp and was now staring at his empty glass like a zombie. That wasn't like Muthu, ruminated Satha, not like Muthu at all. Satha's bleary eyes focussed glassily on his friend and he asked him why he was looking so depressed.
The shebeen was full of raucous people having a great old time. But Satha noticed that his friend Muthu didn’t look too happy. The old man had come into the shebeen a few minutes ago and simply plopped down in a chair. He had taken his first drink in one gulp and was now staring at his empty glass like a zombie. That wasn’t like Muthu, ruminated Satha, not like Muthu at all. Satha’s bleary eyes focussed glassily on his friend and he asked him why he was looking so depressed.

‘That Trishen’s robbing me blind, man.’
‘He’s running your Shakas hardware shop for you, eh, Muthu?’
‘Ja, and the money he’s bringing in isn’t ‘nough to pay the bleddy rent!’
‘But why for you running that small shop when you’ve got a nice, big hardware store next to your house?’
‘It’s for the licence – I run my big business on that small business’ licence.’

Satha nodded sympathetically. ‘Ja, and I suppose it’s difficult for our people to get a licence for a business?’
‘Ja man; where a Coolie like me’s gonna get a licence from the Wur­ropean man?’
‘Ja, that’s true... White people don’t like giving us a business licence; pity, man.’

‘Ja,’ commented Muthu, ‘Europeans don’t like competition from Indians.’
Satha contemplated Muthu’s morose face for a while. Then he said, ‘Why you don’t change your name? You know, to White people’s name?’

‘What! Can’t do dat!’
‘But can, man – look my cousin-brother, his name’s Jaybalan... White people call him Jess. He change his surname from Appalu to Appolos – that’s a Greek name. When he write letter now to White man, the White man think him foreign-White man. He now getting top-class foreign-White treatment! You know foreign-Whites getting best treatment in our coun­try?’

‘But he can only do this when he’s writing to somebody?’
‘Ja, but man, he getting lot privileges with letters... because they thinking him one Vet-Oh, not a bloody Coolie!’
‘But that must have been long ago?’
‘No man, it’s happening now. Yay! You go, change name from Coopoo­samy to something important sounding; now what I heard that Major Mungle calling you? What was it, let me see... Cooper, that’s it, COOPER!'
'Go 'way man, you mad!'
'How then you gonna get licence? That Trishen's getting fat. You wasting time, money on that Shakas shop. You can't be two places one time; you got to look after one shop, man.'
'Ja, but the White man will never let me get a White man's name. Besides I'm not Christian.'
'Look you Hindu, you always Hindu. This White name just to bluff the Vet Oh's. White name don't make you Christian. My cousin Jaybalan, he not Christian just because White people call him Jesse.'
'Ja, but I don't know; my family always had Indian name. What are my relatives gonna think?'
'Your relatives, they not clever like you. If they had half your brains they'd make money like you, and they too would have English names. What use our Indian name? Only get us into trouble.'
Muthu suddenly looked serious; and sober. 'Ja, but it's like spitting on our ancestors, our culture; our names are symbolic of everything that gives us a rich heritage, our identity...'
'Addah, man, what you talking? What's in a name? One name's as good as another. And you know for the White man we're nothing. We just non-whites; he know nutting 'bout our culture, 'bout us. We nothing for him. At least when we use his name we might get somewhere... you not cross when the White customers call you 'Michael' or 'Cooper'?
'No I'm not cross. But I donno, Satha; fifty years I been Muthusamy Coopoosamy; now suddenly you want me to become 'Michael Cooper'... I don't know whether I can adjust to it.'
'For more than twenty years the White people kept name 'Michael' for you. All you doing is making the thing legal, that's all.'
'Hell, I don't know...'
'You'll adjust, man, we Indians know lot 'bout 'dapting. We good at it; the White man, he always closing the front door; we always finding the back door, the side door...'
Muthu: 'Heck, Satha, I feel lousy 'bout this; these damn White people... they name us like they name their cats and dogs; now we add insult to injury by going one step further and making their 'pet-names' legal...'
Satha was not to be put off. 'Well, you might feel bad about it, but man, it serves a higher purpose: it's gonna help your upliftment.'
Muthu looked away from Satha. For a few moments he became oblivious to the noise around him. He stared into space and pondered what Satha had said; much as he did when he played chess; in a crazy way it made sense. It was not the first time he had been forced to eat humble pie in order to get ahead. And it was the kind of tactic that had helped people like him to survive. He reflected to himself, 'We make it by using the opportunity, seizing the initiative, not by sitting on our backsides and letting events overwhelm us! Sometimes it paid to sacrifice the Bishop and gain the Queen.' A gleam came into Muthu's eyes.
Satha noticed the change in Muthu’s face. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I got one lawyer friend; he tell you.’

The lawyer confirmed Satha’s story. Muthu thought about the matter for a few more weeks but there was no hope of getting his hardware licence through a normal application. It was a big thing changing his name, yet he had got used to being called ‘Michael’ and ‘Cooper’; even his friends and most of the Africans and Indians were calling him by these names. His wife didn’t object and he had no children. Secretly she actually liked the White name and often called him ‘Michael’. It was becoming the vogue for Indians to have shortened English names like ‘Pat’ for Pathmanandan or ‘Tom’ for Thiag.

Muthu felt very afraid and nervous, but he consoled himself with the thought that not for nothing was he also known as ‘Bullet-Muthu’. He did his thinking and his work at considerable speed and the local people had affectionately given him the name. He had very little land – certainly not enough to farm and survive on. So he had set up a hardware store in a bundu when other people thought that he was mad to do it. But he had stocked what the Farmers wanted and his prices were keen; he had behaved with humility and the White farmers had not felt threatened; it was to their advantage to buy from him rather than go to the distant White town and buy hardware.

So Muthu made the long journey to the Department of Indian Affairs in Tegwhite to change his name. He was directed through a maze of offices (and was often given wrong directions by irritable clerks) till he finally arrived at the section that handled many things including name-changes. The waiting area was empty. The only person in the Front Office was an Indian clerk who was busy writing at his desk. The man noticed the sheepish-looking, badly dressed Indian come into the office but he continued writing. There were no seats in the reception area and there was just the one solitary desk behind the counter. A plastic name plate on the desk proclaimed, ‘Ahmed Mayet’. Muthu could see a closed door at the back of Ahmed’s open office. The fancy brass name plate had emblazoned on it, ‘SENIOR SUPERVISOR’ and below it in elegant capitals: ‘MR. BALLARD.’ Muthu stood respectfully for a minute thinking the important looking clerk had noticed him. After another minute muthu gave a discreet cough. Ahmed ignored the lone, dark man. Then a White man entered the office.

Ahmed put on a warm, welcoming, obsequious smile and said, as he stood up: ‘Good afternoon, Mr. Nuttall, Sir! Can I help you, Sir?’

‘Hello, Ahmed! Yes, I’m just going to see Mr. Ballard.’ The White man was already entering Ahmed’s office through the swing-door. Ahmed’s smile widened and Mr. Nuttall urbanely breezed through into Mr. Ballard’s office after barely a knock and a calling out of his name.
Muthu said, ‘Eh, excuse me, Sir.’

But Ahmed acted as if Muthu was not there. The old man didn’t know what to do. He needed a service from that clerk, and he couldn’t afford to get upset; so he waited meekly. Finally, after a further two minutes Ahmed stopped writing and deigned to cast an imperial glance at what looked to him like a country-bumkin.

‘Ja?’ he barked, his hand still holding his pen.

‘Please, Sir,’ said Muthu in a plaintive tone as if he was back at school, ‘I want to change... to change my name,’ Muthu was hunched forward in his shabby clothes clenching his hat in his hands. He looked thoroughly servile. Ahmed grinned to himself; this was going to be an amusing day after all!

‘Ja, well, what is your name now?’

‘Muthu, Sir; Muthusamy Coopoosamy.’

‘And? What are you going to change your name to? Poo-poo or Coopo?’ Ahmed grinned.

‘No Sir.’ Years of bureaucratic rudeness and insults had largely inured Muthu to any minor attacks launched by second-rate front office clerks. With great dignity, as if he was already a White man, Muthu said, ‘I want to become... eh... I want to be called... I mean...’

‘Yes man, out with it; what’s going to be your new name?’

‘Michael; Sir. Michael Cooper!’ Even Muthu couldn’t believe he had so much effrontery.

‘What?!’ said Ahmed, his eyes bulging. His pale face turned a shade of pink and he pushed his glasses back. This coal-black Coolie wanted a White man’s name; everybody knew that lots of Coolies were crazy but this...! Ahmed had some White blood in him and he felt he was more entitled to take on a White man’s name than this, this...! but he had stuck to his own name. Now here was a Coolie with the gall...

He struggled to maintain his composure and said, ‘Why do you want a White man’s name?’

‘Oh no Sir, it’s not that, it’s not that at all; it’s just that I got a business and my European customers, they always call me ‘Mike’ or ‘Michael’. My name ‘Muthusamy’... well, it’s difficult for White people to say. Then, all the White people they calling me ‘Cooper’ instead of Coopoosamy. Me, I’m thinking, ‘Michael Cooper’ is a nice-sounding name... and it’s not wrong, because the clever White people... they’re already calling me like that. So I thought nice to make it legal on the pass-book.’ Muthu had spoken earnestly and respectfully and Ahmed had listened attentively.

‘Really? Well, I don’t know about this. Why aren’t you proud to be an Indian and have a nice Indian name? You can change your name if you want, but change it to an Indian name. Otherwise the White people, they might get suspicious.’

‘Begging pardon, sir, but this way I make things easy for the White man... and this is the White man’s country...’
Ahmed shook his head... the tricks the Coolies got up to... they were too much. He had heard the Europeans say that you couldn’t keep them down no matter what you did. They were too cunning, that was the trouble, said the Europeans.

And he knew that the new laws allowed people to change their names to just about anything... that was bad... soon you’d have a whole lot of subservices changing their name to that of seditious swine like ‘Mandela’. This reform business was really getting out of hand. The non-whites didn’t seem to know their place anymore; and ‘elevated’ non-whites like himself who were so indispensable to the White Baas were coming increasingly under pressure.

Reluctantly he pushed the necessary forms across to Muthu and told him to advertise the name change in the daily newspaper three times in three weeks.

Muthu felt as if he was walking on air when he left the office. 1959 might be a lucky year after all.

Two months after the adverts appeared in the paper and after he had personally handed the application forms to Ahmed, Muthu had still not been given official notification of the name change. He went in to see Ahmed.

Ahmed found it difficult to ignore the bumbling old man completely and after only two minutes he spoke to him.

‘Yes?’

‘Please Sir, when will I be informed of my name change? It’s gone more than two months now. There haven’t been any objections to my name change, have there, Sir?’

‘No, there haven’t been any objections; but you must be patient, Coo-poo-sammy, these things take time; many important Government Departments must be notified of this thing you want to do. My supervisor, Mr. Ballard, is a very busy man. The government can’t be hurried you know. You must be very grateful that we allowed you to do all these things.’ Ahmed didn’t think it was right that a grand thing like a White man’s name should come easily to a Coolie.

But Muthu was getting a bit irritated now; (almost like a White man, he reflected to himself with mild surprise). ‘But Sir,’ he remonstrated, ‘I have filled in all the forms and I have advertised as you instructed at great personal expense and nothing’s happened.’

Ahmed looked at the Indian with astonishment. Was the fellow completely barmy? Did he think that a White man’s name made him even slightly into a White man? The old man was even speaking with a degree of confidence that was not there before and he stood a lot straighter. He was actually looking Ahmed in the eye. This was a Coolie who needed to be kept in his place! He had not passed the ‘Cooper’ file across to Mr. Ballard. Now he wondered idly whether he ever should?
'You must go home and wait, Mr. Coo-poo-sammy' he said sternly. 'Patience; patience is a virtue that certain races will do well to imbibe,' he added in the same tone of voice that he had heard the Europeans use when they said that sort of thing. The blank bureaucratic wall was impenetrable. Muthu left.

However, Muthu was finally summoned to appear before District Supervisor Ballard. Dressed impeccably (after all, he was going to see a White man this time) by Satha in a new three-piece suit and tie, old man Muthu presented himself at the Indian affairs office. Nowadays he brought a book along that he was studying, so that he could keep himself busy while Ahmed made him wait. The book was 'LEARN TO SPEAK ENGLISH PROPERLY'. He arrived ten minutes early for his appointment but Ahmed only allowed him to see the European hall an hour later.

Trying to look as innocuous as possible, Muthu entered the office and stood respectfully at attention till the White man decided to look at him. It was a very large, very untidy office full of files and books all thrown higgadly-piggadly all over the place. After about a minute the White man cast a scalding look at Muthu as if he was a 'orribly filthy mess and curtly asked him from his sitting position: 'Now what's all this about you wanting to change your name to a... ' Ballard couldn't bring himself to say it. He was a big, hairy fat man with a huge beer belly that made him look many months pregnant. His brown safari suit bulged in an unseemly manner over his abdomen. His hair was an unruly brown thatch. Ballard was not yet fifty and had lived the good life in what had been a model colony. But now things were changing... as was personified by this ebony, cringing little toad.

The awful expression on the European's face was thoroughly intimidating. This man was a cold, hostile wall that Muthu was facing, somehow worse than Ahmed outside. At least with Ahmed you felt that beyond all the crude harassment was a fellow-being with at least some feeling; that the silly superciliousness was in a sense childish playfulness. But this... this was a cruel monster. Muthu thought that the white man could quite easily issue a decree for him to lose his business or be kicked out of his home. He waited for the supervisor to complete the sentence, but then he finally said, 'Sir, I'm not trying to be difficult. I serve the White people, Sir. They call me 'Cooper'. Mr. Mungle is a rich farmer, Sir; he told me 'Cooper' is a nice name for me, Sir. With respect, Sir, I'm not trying to be a cheeky Coolie, Sir.' Muthu had rehearsed his defence many times at home and he felt quite pleased with his delivery. Even Mr. Stevenson, the author of the English book might have been pleased, reflected Muthu. 'Well, I don't know about that...' Ballard glared at the uncomfortable-looking Coolie and remembered that he had named his dog, 'Adolph'. Well, what was wrong with the name 'Cooper' for a Coolie? It was a good
Anglo-Saxon name and perhaps it was all part of the march of Western Culture. The American Negroes had all lost their own names and languages. Perhaps that was the destiny of the Indians too. Besides whatever name the Coolies used, they were still Coolies.

Muthu had known that he would be treated provocatively, but as he planned, he kept cool. With a great deal of effort he suppressed the fury welling up within him and he said in an even voice, 'I beg your pardon, Sir, but I have a letter from Major Mungle, Sir.'

'Really?' Ballard was surprised.

The Indian handed the Supervisor the letter. Ballard opened the sealed envelope. It was neatly typed and stated:

'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN'

_I have known Muthusamy Coopoosamy for the last thirty years. During that time he has rendered valuable service to the local European farming community through his hardware and poultry businesses. He has often served us even on Sundays. During that time he has become known to the local farmers as 'Michael' and at times has been referred to as 'Michael Cooper'. He has always been of a cooperative disposition and I am sure that a name change will merely legalize what has become a statement of fact._

It was signed with a large flourish by the Major. Ballard was impressed. This was the right sort of Coolie, then; not one of your agitators. And it seemed the ape was serious about this name change thing. Ballard played with his little beard, enjoying the feeling of the fur and the sense of power he always revelled in when he tormented a non-white – much like a cat playing with a cockroach.

Suddenly he transfixed the Indian with his cold 'White man' look and said imperiously, 'You may go now.'

Muthu slid out of the office feeling very inferior, very stupid and a real nuisance. Why had he let Satha talk him into this crazy thing?

After another month, Muthu came into Ahmed’s waiting room. This time after only two minutes, Ahmed said, with just a touch of irritation, 'Yes?'

Muthu was tired of everything: coming here, being treated like a pest, everything. But he had spent good money on this thing and it was only right that he got what he had paid for. After all, what he was doing was not against the White man’s law.

Muthu didn’t say anything. He just looked with a haggard expression on his face at the clerk.

Ahmed stood up, threw his pen down on his desk and said, 'Ah, Mr. Coo-poo-samy! We’ve got to know you well!' He grinned at the old man and came over to the counter. 'You know, old man, the trouble with us Indians (Ahmed’s heart almost gave a lurch when he said this: he didn’t really think of himself as an Indian, well not the ordinary kind of Indian anyway) is that we tend to work very hard on doing something like build-
ing a fine house, but we lack the finishing touch – what the White people call finesse. You know an Indian will sweat blood to build a house, but he won’t spend a rand on getting the front lawn cut... he’ll build a fancy hotel and all the area around the hotel will be like a pig-sty... and he’ll pay his staff peanuts. He’ll study hard and qualify as a doctor but he’ll talk like a motor-mechanic. Now people like us, you know what I mean,’ Ahmed winked a few times at the old man and gave a conspiratorial grin, ‘who try for something better with our lives.’

Muthu’s face feigned ignorance.

Ahmed: ‘Oh, come on now, you know what I mean; we are birds of a feather, you and I... you trying to take on a White man’s name like ‘Cooper’ of all things and me here... well if you want a White man’s name, you better learn to be a little like him...’

‘You mean this finesse thing?’

‘Precisely, old man, precisely!’ Who said you couldn’t teach an old dog new tricks? though Ahmed. ‘Look here Muthu,’ he said aggressively, ‘you don’t look stupid to me (well not completely stupid, cogitated Ahmed). But you’ve come unstuck here because you haven’t put the ‘finishing touch’ to this thing!’

‘Finishing touch, Sir?’

‘Yes, man; the ‘finishing touch’ – a bit of gravy, you know what I mean, some butter on the toast, a bit of grease on the...’

Ahmed looked knowingly at the Indian.

For a few moments Muthu was puzzled but then suddenly the devious expression on the clerk’s face made sense... ‘have to learn to be a little like the White man’ thought Muthu. ‘Is there anything in particular you would like, Sir, I mean in the way of gravy?’

‘Well, I happen to know that Mr. Ballard likes Chicken Biryani... and his mouth absolutely waters for Dhall-roti... now if you could see your way clear to...’

‘Oh, certainly Sir, most stupid of me Sir! I have a little poultry-farm I run on the side, Sir, do you think Mr. Ballard would like some eggs too, Sir?’

Ahmed’s face was one big wolfish grin.

Satha and his friend were drinking; and why not? This time they had good reason – they had something to celebrate!

‘Mr. Cooper, Sir, now that you have Trishen in your big shop and under your thumb, are you going to squeeze?’

‘Like a White man, Satha, like a White man! With finesse, Satha, with loads of ice-cold, decorous finesse!’

‘Ice-cold what?’

‘Decours finesse Satha, decorous finesse. It means to handle something carefully... with a fine, careful touch. I’m reading all the books the White people read, Satha; they can’t stop us from doing that.’
'Really, Mu, I mean Michael.' Satha's eyes were blood-shot and bulging. He was really impressed. He gripped his drink tightly in his left hand and stared at 'Mr. Cooper'.

'Yes, man, and I listen to them very carefully when they talk, the White people; don't you think I am beginning to sound like them now?'

'Mr. Cooper, Sir, I think you are.'

'And I've enrolled in a Speech and Drama class... you just wait and see; soon, when I talk to you on the phone you won't be able to make out that Mr. Cooper is anything but a dyed-in-the-wool Englishman.'

'Died in the what?' Satha was getting quite confused by his White-named friend.

'Michael' grinned. 'A pukka Englishman, Satha; a real, honest-to-goodness English bull-dog!'

Satha: 'Ja man, that's true; the other day you rang my house; my niece answered, you know the fancy one who think she's very clever – the girl who's going to Varsity – she thought you were a White man; she was very impressed. 'I didn't know you know White people so well they actually phone you!' she said. I think she respects me more now, Michael.'

Michael gave his friend a benign look of self-assured superiority that he had so often seen the Whites give the non-whites.

Satha looked with awe at his friend. 'Is it true you even got treated at the Coloured section of Paddington Hospital?'

Michael: 'Yes, well, the non-white hospital is far too busy, Satha; it was no problem; once the Indian clerks saw my name I just filled a form and I was seen by the doctor in less than half an hour.'

'So quickly? My aunty, she wait 'ole day by King's Hospital. Then the clerks say she must come next day for the medicines; but what race you put on the form?'

'I put 'Other Coloured'.'

'Other Coloured? What's that?'

'Well, the government has a classification for those who don't fit into the normal Coloured classification: you know, those who are not Cape Coloured or Malay.'

Satha: 'Ay, look's like I gave you good advice, ay Michael? Imagine being treated in a White hospital!'

'No Satha, the Coloured section of the White hospital; but, Satha, I must thank you for your advice; it's transformed my life.'

'Well, let's celebrate now, eh, Mike. These days you even drinking like a vet-oh!' He held up his drink with a flourish: 'Here's to your new name, Michael, here's to your hardware licence, to the Licencing Bureau, to Capitalism, here's to...'

Michael clicked glasses with Satha: 'To the Indian Affairs bums... to Western Civilization, to Free Enterprise, and Satha...?'

'Yes, my friend?'

'Here's to the Finishing Touch!'