The misfit as the medium: a pattern in the fiction of Lee Kok Liang

Wong Siew Ean

University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation

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 MISFIT AS THE MEDIUM: A PATTERN IN THE FICTION OF LEE KOK LIANG

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

M.A. Hons.

from

The University of Wollongong

by

Wong Siew Ean, B.A. (Hons.)

Department of English

February 1993
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the invaluable guidance, encouragement and generous attention given to this thesis I would like to thank Dr. Dorothy Jones. I am indebted to Dr. Paul Sharrad for his kind support, and I am deeply grateful to my husband and my daughter for their patience and understanding.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Artist as the Misfit</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Vague Dreams and Unfulfilled Desires</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Praying for Great Wealth</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Like a Wounded Animal</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Blistering with Sweat</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Flowers in the Sky -- a case study</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Of his fiction Lee Kok Liang says:

....my writing, I feel is an expression, partly of myself and partly of things that are important to me. 1


Unlike the travel brochures and guide books about Malaysia which present a shallow, manufactured pleasantness for the tourists who are mainly interested in the exotic beach and hill resorts, Lee's stories are sensitive and profound studies for those who are interested in the complexities of Malaysia's multicultural society.

Three factors seem to have influenced Lee's fiction -- his Chinese migrant background, his English education and the politics of Malaysia as a newly emergent nation.

The Malaysia of Lee's fiction is a melting pot of different languages, customs and beliefs, as well as a stage where the major migrant races -- the Chinese and the Indian -- come to terms with the country their ancestors have made their own, since the eighteenth century. Lee himself is a fifth generation Chinese of Hokkien extraction.

He was born in 1927 in Alor Star in north Malaysia. He had an English education as children of far-sighted families were given in British Malaysia, except for the years of the Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945 when the teaching of English was disallowed by the Japanese. During that period of the Japanese Occupation his
education was wholly in Chinese. This must have enhanced his knowledge of Chinese folklore and literature which is illustrated so clearly in many of his stories. He came to Melbourne University in 1949 to read Arts and Law and later went to the United Kingdom to complete his legal studies. He returned to Malaysia in 1954 where he was called to the Bar in Penang where he practised as a lawyer.²

He was an avid reader of English and European literature which left its mark upon his style of writing. There is more than a touch of European realism in his fiction in which he explores and examines the interaction between people and their society.

Contemporary Malaysia is an emergent nation which employs aggressive political measures to promote and reinforce Malaysian nationalism. This involves discriminatory laws to promote Malay welfare and muffle non-Malay protests and questions. (After Independence the adoption throughout Malaysia of the term 'bumiputera' [sons of the soil] constitutionally protected privileges secured to Malays.) To a large extent, for idealistic nationalists such as Lee the dreams of a truly Malaysian society where all cultures flourish equally have not been realized. As a young idealist he was an active participant in local politics. Thus, he was a member of the Socialist Front which was dissolved in 1969 after the racial riots of the same year. He held seats in the Penang City Council (1958-63) and the State Assembly (1959-64). But those who engaged in open criticism, local or international, of the government were likely to fall foul of it.

In an interview with Paul Sharrad on Lee's visit to Australia in 1982, Lee comments on his political life and his style and content of writing:

....As a politician I say what I want to say, as a writer I despise the politicians. I don't set out to write political types of stories. ³
Given this emphatic comment on his work, it would be inaccurate to insist that Lee's stories contain overt censure of politics. John Barnes, in his paper, 'The Fiction of Lee Kok Liang', confirms Lee's appraisal of himself:

The appeal of Lee Kok Liang's fiction does not lie in documentation but in its revelation of the inner characteristics of Malaysian life. He does not write as a political critic of those who govern, but as an interpreter of Malaysian Society.

In the context of the migrant experience in multiracial Malaysia, one of the things 'important' to Lee is the question of identity and the quest for it. This quest is very much the concern of modern writers, and particularly significant for one from a postcolonial, multicultural and discriminatory society. At least three characters in Lee's work are shown as actively engaged in this quest -- Dr. K. in *Flowers in the Sky*, Poopsie in *The T-Set* and Dr. Bin in *Not So Long Ago but Still Around*. (Perhaps this is because of their exposure to the ideas of Western education or travel.) But even if Lee's other characters are not shown as actively engaged in the search for identity, nonetheless, the kinds of issue Lee raises in his portrayal of them shows that the concept of identity, racial or cultural, is of considerable significance to the text. Thus, in his fiction, Lee is concerned about this quest for identity, especially as it affects the Chinese in Malaysia. In this context Lee examines the problems his protagonists encounter: rejection by a major native culture; alienation from their own community; disillusionment with their traditional beliefs; a political system which discriminates against them and oppression by those in authority and power. He draws attention to many of these issues by focusing on the human body and its relation to its physical environment as a sign of people's inability to cope.

This dissertation aims to explore Lee's method of examining the mainly migrant Chinese problems that in turn qualifies him as an 'interpreter of Malaysian society'. K.S. Maniam suggests that the writer who writes in English has:
Thus, the context of Lee's fiction shows that writing in English is itself a sign of distance from normative versions of national and ethnic cultures, therefore the misfit figure is appropriate to the author's (and the text's) place in society and mediates his/its representation of it.

Lee's writing in English reduces him to the rank of a writer of sectional literature as opposed to that of a writer of national literature who would be expected to write in Bahasa Malaysia -- the national language. The first chapter, 'The Artist as the Misfit', investigates the problems of 'not belonging' to mainstream literature which results, to a certain extent, from the legacy of British colonialism. Lee, an English-educated, Chinese Malaysian writer knows what it is like to be on the margin. He is therefore a qualified authority on the plight of the Chinese who have been relegated to the edge.

As a lawyer, Lee frequently encounters cases of injustice, oppression and inequality. As a writer, he uses these experiences to write about the struggle of the alienated person. The second chapter, 'Vague Dreams and Unfulfilled Desires', attends to the social misfits, the guilty, the self-exiled, the helpless and the murderer; all sufferers in a world that is often cruel and oppressive.

Alienation stems from some kind of conflict. In the case of the misfits of Lee's fiction their alienation arises from the clash between traditional beliefs and modern ideologies. The encroachment of modernization and the new materialism also changes and corrupts community values. The third chapter, 'Praying for Great Wealth', traces the condition of the misfits and how they are created by the tensions between tradition...
and westernization, between religion and materialism and between community expectations and individual needs.

The fourth chapter, 'Like a Wounded Animal', shows how the misfit's situation may be expressed through physical pain. It illustrates how people are oppressed and abused by authority and power. Stark and unrelentless images of the poor, the mutilated, the helpless and voiceless abound. Lee's method of comparing his 'victims' to animals makes the abuser appear more monstrous and the abused more pitiful.

'Blistering with Sweat', the fifth chapter, examines the misfits in terms of this inability to cope with the physical environment signified by profuse sweating. While sweating is a natural body function profuse sweating is seen as a disorder by Lee. Thus, he uses the heavily sweating body as a metaphor of the discomfort and the assault which affect a person's mental and spiritual resolve.

Lastly, Flowers in the Sun, (Lee's only novel to date, published in 1981), is used as a case study expressing all the major concerns of the previous chapters as well as an example of a more representative Malaysian novel. In this novel almost every race and creed in Malaysia is given attention, albeit unequally. By the time of the publication of this novel Lee has become a mature artist and social thinker. He gives an example of hope, expressed in the quality of compassion, which can make the misfit less alienated in a society which has all the seeds of improvement.
Chapter One

The Artist As The Misfit

In describing the literature of the emerging nations of Southeast Asia since the Japanese occupation, the period when an Asian imperialist nation brandished the appealingly provocative slogan of 'Asia for the Asians', Lloyd Fernando affirms:

We can detect...certain broad themes: a spirit of nationalism evident in the rejection of any further efforts to subjugate people; a hatred of injustice, inequality, and oppression from any quarter; the assertion of our own human dignity through the development of a distinctive natural style in our lives based on the use of national languages;...the affirmation of unity among men; and the wish to keep our own house in order through a fearless scrutiny of our own shortcomings and failures in coping with the transition from traditional to modern life.¹

The themes and main concerns of the fiction of Lee Kok Liang mirror this affirmation in all but the area of language, that is, his fiction is not written in the national language of Malaysia, which is Bahasa Malaysia. The rationale for this is the focus of this first chapter which discusses the artist as misfit.

The distinction that Lloyd Fernando makes between 'nation' and 'tradition' is a good stepping stone towards unveiling the predicament of the author:

A nation is defined by clearly marked political boundaries. A tradition....refers to the continuity of beliefs, customs and languages. (CC, 139)

Therefore the two words should not be used interchangeably. In Malaysia there are four main cultural traditions co-existing -- Malay, Chinese, Indian and English. In speaking of the national literature of Malaysia, one invariably refers to the main line of tradition which is literature written in Bahasa Malaysia, which has gained its place by
virtue of 'the weight and authority of history'. (CC, 141) Literature written in Chinese and Indian languages and English is described by the government as 'sectional literature'. (CC, 141)

One can deduce that the writer of sectional literature faces many problems, particularly the psychological one of 'great depth and intensity' (CC, 144) which Lloyd Fernando has labelled as a 'detribalisation anxiety'. (CC, 144) He, as every migrant does, goes through the mentally painful and physically exhausting process of unlearning, while not giving up his own native tradition, and at the same time learning, yet not totally accepting the tradition of the new country. This anxiety is best illustrated in two of Lee Kok Liang's short stories, where surreal dreams give shape and voice to disquietude.

'It's All in a Dream' tells the story of a man who having been arrested for an undefined offence, commits the particular crime of betraying the political cause, of which he had been a prominent member, for the chance of a new life for himself and his family. On a train journey to his place of exile he dozes off and dreams a dream which turns into a horrific nightmare. It becomes the metaphor of his anxiety about his family line (a most acute anxiety for an Asian family), and the impending annihilation of his own child by a boy whom the man has loved as another son. Figures melt into other figures -- a Hindu god, a fat woman, a mutilated corpse, his child, the boy, a monkey, a mutilated man -- until the climactic bathos when he wakes up just as he is about to save his screaming child. He wakes up highly vexed and petrified but consoles himself with the closing line of the story, '[if] not tonight, then the next night, surely' (DC, 92) when he will reenter the dream to actually save the child. That he will fail to save his child is the deep-seated fear, which is not part of his conscious life, which deals with the questions of loyalty, commitment and continuance.
Another horrific dream occurs in 'Ibrahim Something'. In what Ibrahim, a Chinese who becomes a Muslim, calls 'a terrible nightmare', his anxiety about his mixed marriage and a subsequent mixed family line unfurls. The nightmare is about a man who is tormented by the negative forces of society in a life-draining situation depicted by the black statues (signifying evil) and the disappearance of the numerous fountains (signifying the loss of life giving objects). Yet he knows that it is within his power to turn the black statues back to white and to bring about the return of the life giving fountains. Thus, the tale of the semi-educated Chinese man, appraising his Chinese-Malay marriage and his and his wife's struggle to cope with the taunts and insensitivity of a community unable to come to terms with a mixed-marriage, is a story that seeks to present the subtle problem of discovering a multiracial identity. Before he married his wife some years ago Ibrahim was able to advise the narrator, then a boy:

'When you grow up, believe in what you believe enough to change yourself'. (DC, 106)

Given the racial composition of Malaysia's population (mainly Malays, Chinese, Indians and a minute percentage of Eurasians), it can be taken for granted that sectional literature in Chinese or Tamil can be ignored but writing in English, especially when it is a:

....dying medium as a direct consequence of political decisions which have been taken ostensibly in the interests of homogenous nationalism, seems provocative and begs the question of the writers' background and intentions.

In an interview with Paul Sharrad, Lee affirms that his writing in English is a 'result of [his] education' and that he has 'always written in English' although he has 'attempted some Chinese poetry but not short stories' because he comes from an English-educated family. In many ways his background is not dissimilar to Shirley
Lim's, a writer of immense insight who has claimed English as her own. She does not write in the national language nor does she feel guilty about it. She writes:

'...as Malaysia progresses further and further into its nationalistic future, claiming its own language, I am in danger of further losing possession of a national self, my public, my social traditions. That is as it should be.'

This attitude, according to Ooi Boo Eng, is adopted by most if not all Malaysian writers in English. Another prominent writer, K. S. Maniam, when asked if the writer 'should not change with the newer developments in the country' answers most emphatically:

'No....one simply cannot abandon the "instrument" one knows well for another at which he is merely proficient.'

Ooi argues that the 'detribalization anxiety' that the migrant writer experiences is not concerned with the English language, the language of the colonial masters, but with the national language. After Bahasa Malaysia becomes the national language the non-Malays, who have had an English education, find themselves, in cultural terms, doubly dispossessed.

Lee's anxiety can be unequivocally detected when he laments, with sad resignation the feeling of 'being left out in the cold' for writing in English:

'Perhaps in twenty or thirty years' time when emotionalism over the language question dies down, we might get a chance....'

This feeling is shared by Ee Tiang Hong who, in self-exile in Australia, thinks bitterly of what he sees as 'the official myth of Malaysian identity at odds with the human reality of Malaysian history.'
Lee continues his interview with Paul Sharrad by pointing out that the politicians are pressuring the Malays to write and 'seducing them with prizes and glory and social standing'. One of the most prestigious and profitable prizes is the Anugerah Sastera Negara worth M$ 30,000 (1982) and some special benefits to boot. However it is only awarded to writings in the national language. Thus, writings in English are automatically excluded from any prizes or awards on the semi-official, official or national levels.

So why do the authors write in English? It is partly because of their education, their claiming English as their own tongue. As artists 'they must [write], award or no award, recognition as 'national' or as only 'sectional'. This raises the question of whether the exclusion of sectional literature from national awards is a symptomatic exclusion of all activities that do not serve the national interest. Lee's short stories, as metaphors of suppression and denial of non-Malays and their needs and experiences, prove this practice of exclusion to be real. The stories abound with characters who are abused, silenced and oppressed. Yet it would be too simplistic to regard his fiction just as a vehicle to air grievances, for Lee, the artist, 'does not write as a political critic, but as an interpreter of Malaysian society'.

Lee can lay claim to be a more representative Malaysian author for his fiction recreates innumerable aspects of Malaysian life. His Malaysia is perceived by the senses. Heat is felt by his characters and they sweat visibly. An excellent example of the intensity and the effect of the sun is depicted in Flowers in the Sky:

The sun crushed all the freshness from [Hung]. He was mildewed with sweat....The air seared his lungs and at times his skin was covered with rashes....(FS, 132)

Vibrant and brilliant flowers explode in the scenes which leave the reader's imagination startled. There are 'yellow alamandes', red 'hibiscus', white 'frangipanis',
'ixoras gleaming like a pin-cushion stuck with scarlet needles, pink, trumpet cannas, flames of the forest and pungent stardust bunga belok'. (DC, 136) In Mr. K.'s garden a 'huge rain tree dominated it'; he has the gardener plant 'gold and red bougainvilleas in rows'. The masses of orchids' 'array of colours mixed well with the colour of the sea'; 'red Tomies, violet Dendroniums....white Phalaenopsis, lavender Zodas and sensual Volaceas' all make Mr. K. 'wonder at the marvels of nature'. (FS, 26)

Luscious Malaysian fruits seduce the sense of taste -- 'rambutans and mangosteens', 'durian and chempedek'; while Malaysian 'rokok', 'cheroots', and 'betel-leaf' provoke interest in smell. And of all the myriad sounds that arrest the hearing, for example the 'hawkers' cry', 'children laughing', and music from the 'ronggeng', none is more pervasive than the call of the muezzin.

In his stories, Lee brings the four main religions of the country into focus, namely Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, although not equally. Similarly, he elaborates on some of the feast days of each of the different racial groups in Malaysia: Thaipusam, a religious day of the Hindus, Wesak Day, the birthday of the Buddha and Independence day, a day of rejoicing for Malaysians. In his novel Flowers in the Sky he engages the three main racial groups in a drama of relationships and interactions.

A thought-provoking trait of Lee's fiction is that the majority of his characters do not possess a name. Some are just called 'the man', 'the girl' or 'the boy'. In the lengthy short story The Mutes in the Sun the protagonist is just called 'he' and only by reference once (from the torn diary of his friend) do we know that he is called 'Met'. Likewise, the doctor protagonist of Flowers in the Sky is called Krishna only once in the book. The rest of the time he is just called 'Mr. K.' while the Venerable Hung is usually just called 'the monk'. Also, although the setting is undeniably Malaysia, the word 'Malaysia' is never mentioned in Lee's fiction. Neither is the national language identified as Bahasa Malaysia. Sharilyn Wood has an answer for this:
In this way, the actors and settings are subjugated to the plot, theme and idea. In this way, whatever emotions and behaviours depicted are meant to be associated with all mankind and the philosophies explored are therefore universalized. This also argues a general depersonalisation that suggests a broadly existentialist view of life but also allows the individual to stand as a figure for a group.

Another question seems timely at this point. Who are Lee's readers and what audience is he trying to reach? Writing in the English language is fraught with ambivalence. His Malaysian readership will be the English-speaking, English-educated section of the population. This comprises mainly non-Malays. Again, as his themes and main concerns -- the plight of the oppressed, the voiceless, the weak and the helpless -- are best illustrated by the migrants and their experience in Malaysia, it is mainly the non-Malays who will appreciate his stories. Rather interestingly his Malay characters (except for 'Just a Girl' and 'Ronggeng Ronggeng' which portray women oppressed and dictated to by their own community) occupy positions of power, either petty or immense, as for example, policemen, inspectors and politicians.

If Lee's English readership in Malaysia is restricted by his themes and his use of English, his readership outside Malaysia might be restricted by his technique, mainly his use of Chinese folklore, symbols and myths which might defer author-reader relationship to a later date when the reader is acquainted with the imagery or myth used by the author; and his use of unglossed and untranslated words. This technique is used by mainly post-colonial writers who want to add authenticity to their work as well make a statement on cultural and language differences.

Lee's fiction falls into the category of post-colonial literature. It deals with issues and problems which Malaysians face after the British have left. The time span of his stories covers the Japanese Occupation in 'Ibrahim Something' to Independence in
'When the Saints go Marching' and beyond, to 1981, when *Flowers in the Sky* is published. This period coincides with the end of British colonialism and the emergence and assertion of Malaysia as a nation. Colonialism has left a legacy which Lee's postcolonial voice comments on.

In *Flowers in the Sky* two statements made by Mr. K. seem to be the epitome of post-colonial protests against the West and Western education. As Mr. K. thinks of his increasingly materialistic and shallow wife:

> somehow he wished he had married a girl with native education. English education made one so arid and selfish or was it self-centred? The warmth and the tradition seemed to have been sieved off....All that remained were logic, resentment, abrasiveness and a general distaste for the stupidity of the non English-educated. (FS, 30)

And:

> He sometimes wondered if...[his way] of thinking was due to the influence of the west....He had been so imbued with Western thoughts that his married life had been ruled by concepts of the latest demagogue ruling Western psychology. (FS, 145)

But according to Ooi Boo Eng such statements cannot be taken to be Lee's 'considered' attitude towards the west and he puts forward a few 'considerations which considerably weaken or qualify their validity as arguments in the East-versus-West debate'. Firstly, the comments are Mr. K.'s and not Lee's; secondly, since they (the comments) occur at the time when Mr. K. is evaluating his marriage and the direction of his life, they cannot represent his final views on the subject; thirdly, saying that 'English education made one so arid and selfish' is a grossly sweeping statement that cannot be proven; and fourthly, many people would like to know their mother tongue as well as -- not instead of -- English because they will be the richer for knowing two languages equally well.
However, Lee's post-colonial comment takes on a sharper edge in 'Not So Long Ago but Still Around'. A successful doctor, Dr. Bin, trained in the West (Edinburgh), feels proud and honoured because he has been admitted as a committee member of an exclusive Club for Englishmen. There, the trappings of the old colonial days still exist, for example, the 'Illustrated London News' is the Club's staple news, and the 'colonial style' building with 'fluted columns set behind a circle of royal palms that ringed a tightly mown lawn in front' gives an air of imposing dignity. The older members display a disproportionate seriousness towards the Club as is shown in the dispute over changing the name of a wing of the building. At the beginning of the story, the committee members are to vote for or against this change and Dr. Bin, suddenly intimidated by the European members, refrains from voting, much to the annoyance of the younger set. Thus he has failed both ways -- failed to support the younger set and allowed himself to be intimidated by the older set. This cowering is held in great contempt by the oldest member called 'the Venerable' who loudly voices his opinion. At this point:

Dr. Bin suddenly wished he had never joined the Club or accepted nomination to this Committee. (DC, 177)

His work and his dalliance with the Club leave him little time for his wife and family. His wife would like him to take a greater interest in the family and the things that she does, for example, her deep involvement with the temple. He forgets one of her activities and their quarrel reveals a cultural malaise:

'Don't you? No, I see it, you don't. All you remember is going to the grand parties with your friends where women have breasts as big as their buttocks.' (DC, 183)

And on another occasion his wife accuses him of being ashamed of her because she cannot speak English and does not dress 'like a prostitute' and jeers at his association with one of the women of the club:
'Everyone knows. Aren't you ashamed? Laughing like a monkey....They laughed at you. Your English friends. I saw it.' (DC, 187)

Thus, association with the West is not only a belittling exercise but a corrupting one. According to his wife, Dr. Bin has betrayed his own Chinese society for one that does not accept him. This is the confusion that besets Dr. Bin. In the end, he realizes and admits despondently to himself that he has been little but a convenience for the Englishmen. The story ends starkly:

He was a bloody workhorse he was. They only wanted to sweat him out. God! (DC, 199)

This corruption of the West is further emphasized in a neat tale, 'The T-Set'. The protagonist, after a stay in the West where he vainly falls in love with a beautiful white girl, who is shallow, frivolous, demanding and can 'adapt herself to the personality of a new man as easily as a chameleon', comes back home to become a Buddhist priest. The metaphor of the story is obvious. The beautiful white girl is the seduction of the West by which the Eastern boy's senses are at the same time fascinated and tempted and to which he later succumbs. But the boy is left dissatisfied, empty, angry and hurt after tasting the narcissistic fruit. He goes back to the pure, innocent and uncorrupted ways of the East. In a letter to an understanding friend he writes:

....I felt as if I had been drawn into a nightmare; an inverted world, where everything I had considered to be right was in fact wrong....so like [a] little bird, having regained my strength, I take leave of your branch and return to my native soil. (DC, 60-61)

However, Lee's post-colonial voice is clearest in his use of unglossed and untranslated words. In this way he seems to be creating circles of increasing exclusivity of understanding dependent on the reader's knowledge of local words. On the outer-most circle the reader perceives Malaysia through the senses. Sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste are all employed to create some very vivid descriptions. The
reader comes to piece together the puzzle of the nation, little by little, as time, space, festivals and activities form the backdrop for the characters' drama.

The circle diminishes when unglossed Malay words are used, for example, the chapters of *The Mutes in the Sun* are designated by the Malay words for numbers. Of course it is easy to guess that 'satu, dua, tiga, empat' stand for 'one two, three and four' and so on. 'Sarong' is an almost international word now, due to the popularity of Indonesia, particularly Bali, and Malaysia as holiday resorts. But what about 'bomoh', 'stengah', 'chepat' or as 'soft as kapuk'? A Malay dictionary will help clear the mystery by revealing 'bomoh' to be a village medicine man; 'stengah' middle or half (in this case a half measure of whiskey) and 'chepat' to be 'quickly' and soft 'as kapuk' soft as a kind of tropical silky cotton. As mentioned before, the reader-author rapport is not immediate but deferred until the reader knows what the untranslated words mean.

Yet, it is not the unglossed Malay words but the unglossed and untranslated Baba-Hokkien words and their allusions that I find most fascinating and these must surely constitute a critical element in our understanding and enjoyment of Lee's work. Can Lee be setting up a rapport especially with his Hokkien readers, in a sustained mood of playfulness or can he be optimistic enough to think that these Hokkien words can be understood by all (keeping in mind that Hokkien is only a dialect out of many in the Chinese language)? Perhaps his enigmatic intention can best be summed up by a statement from *The Empire Writes Back*:

> Ultimately, the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status.  

The Hokkien words evoke a world containing children's games, folk tales, stories of gods, gambling, music, Chinese traditions and Chinese idioms. A Hokkien would be
drawn into an esoteric understanding of Lee's stories by the allusions associated with the words. The Chinese folk tale 'San Peh and Eng Tai', the historical romance 'Yang Kue-fei' and the name 'Ah Qua' all occur in 'The Pei-Pa'. This is the story of a Chinese wandering singer-cum-musician who has just forced his daughter into prostitution out of a desperate need for money to cure his son. He encounters two uncouth, uneducated men who have just been to a brothel owned by Ah Qua....and who eventually recognize him to be the father of the new prostitute for whom they have just paid an undeserved extra ten dollars. They break his pei-pa in anger. As it is being returned to him by a young soldier, who seems interested in his daughter, he laments over the romance that might have been between the soldier and his daughter.

'San Peh and Eng Tai' is a much loved and the most popular romance about ill-fated lovers who are forced by parental will to be apart and to marry others. He, San Peh, dies of an illness caused by lovesickness and she, Eng Tai, commits suicide in his honour. The Pei-pa man wants to sing this romance to the two uncouth men thus marking the difference between the fantasy of gentle romance and the harsh reality of the cruel, crude world. Again, the allusion to Yang Kue-fei sets up a painful comparison with his daughter. Yang Kue-fei was a very famous beauty during the Tang Dynasty in China. The Emperor first saw her at her bath and was so besotted that he ignored the rest of his concubines (it is said that he had three thousand of them), showered her with gifts and his presence. Her feminine art of seduction so enchanted the Emperor that he neglected state affairs and before he knew it the country was being invaded. His soldiers refused to fight until the Emperor was forced to give up Yang Kue-fei, who was condemned to commit suicide in front of him. By comparison, the Pei-pa man's daughter is forced into the arms of greasy men, to suffer abuse and indignity. By alluding to Yang Kue-fei, the Pei-pa man's daughter's life seems all the more bleak and humiliating, and her future, hopeless.
Ah Qua is a Hokkien word for a no-hoper or a dandy. It is not surprising that the two crude men deflower the Pei-pa man's daughter in his brothel. Given such allusions, the plight of the girl is unrelentlessly agonizing and Lee achieves his aim to depict the mute suffering of the oppressed poor and hopeless.

In 'Small Fried Fish' a small wiry labourer called Fried Fish invites a widow, whom he likes, to a show called 'Tan Sa Ngoh Neoh'. This is another very popular romance among Hokkien opera goers. The invitation to this show suggests that Fried Fish is serious about the widow, for he is accompanying her to a traditional theatre performance instead of 'going with Monkey [a fellow labourer] to a bad woman'. (DC, 38)

The nameless protagonist, who comes back to his hometown in 'Return to Malaya', encounters many sights as he goes looking for his lost bicycle. One of the encounters is a group of five children playing a little game. This cheers him 'up a bit'. He watches them play:

- One two som, la-la-li-tum bong
- And a fat man, very fat-lah, chased the rat with a tooth-brush
- I know-man, I know-man, he was brushing his teeth Chek, chek, chek (Gurgles of laughter)
- He lost his spectacles-lah, Ai-ya! do you know what he looked like
- Like what
- Like a tortoise with goat's dung eyes, chek, chek
- Ai-ya! yes-lah, and he lost them, the spectacles-lah
- One two som, la-la-li-tum-bong, I won!

They [speak] in a sort of Hokkien Chinese....with a few Malay and English expressions thrown in. (MS, 129)

Once again the untranslated words of the game evoke very pleasant memories of childhood games, but only to the person who understands Hokkien.

Lee offers many insights into the Baba Hokkien community. One observes that in 'Death is a Ceremony' the household is dominated by women. The dying grandmother is the dying matriach over whom all others hover anxiously. The other characters of
importance are Baba's mother, and Kor Por, grandmother's sister. Baba's female cousins also have a lot to say. According to Chinese tradition, a daughter's son would not be considered part of the family; yet here Baba is regarded as the oldest grandson, and acts this role during the grandmother's funeral. This is because the Baba and Nonya (early Straits born Chinese) have adopted an Indonesian custom which has its origin in the Minangkabau matrilineal society. Thus many Hokkien families of Straits origin practise this matrilineal lineage where power lies in the hands of women. It then falls neatly into place that the grandmother's eldest son is so suffocated by his mother's fussing and ambition that he left home a long time ago and when he comes back for his mother's funeral, he sees the pattern repeating itself in his sister's son, who, by matrilineal heritage, is expected to carry on and shoulder the family's hopes and aspirations.

Throughout his stories readers sense Lee's search for self-identity as he considers the artist as the misfit. His writing in English places his fiction outside mainstream national literature and its trappings of recognition and prizes. Yet his English works carry many unglossed and untranslated words which limit his international readership. The esoteric quality of his stories await full appreciation by a wider readership. Meanwhile, Lee accomplishes the twin aim of depicting the oppressed people of society (which are the Chinese in many of his stories) and identifying himself as an appropriate scribe of their plight.
Chapter Two

Vague Dreams and Unfulfilled Desires

The world of Lee Kok Liang's fiction is mostly a cold and uncaring one where characters are misfits, living in a changing society which is increasingly unable to meet their physical needs or fulfil their emotional and spiritual longings. This world is Malaysia, where, among other migrants, the Chinese have been coming to settle for more than two hundred years, adapting to the Malaysian climate and environment while largely retaining their Chinese culture and tradition. Also, Chinese settlement in Malaysia (Malaya, as it was called before 1963) coincided with British colonization of the country. During this time the expedient Chinese adapted to British colonialism, learning English for example, which meant they were eventually disproportionately represented in a rising professional class.

With independence, the nation's aggressive emphasis on nationalism has resulted in a strong focus being placed on the Malay culture, the Malay tradition and the Malay language. As non-Malay cultures and traditions are disregarded, the spark of racial animosity, which began with the British leaving Malaya, relegating political power to the Malays and economic power to the Chinese, exploded into the racial riots of 1969. After this event, all issues which are considered sensitive to the Malays, for example, the question of Malay rights, land rights, places in tertiary education, were banned from open discussion. The passing of the Constitution Act, 1971, muffled any discussion, from private conversation to the media and even in parliament.
Lee Kok Liang, a fifth generation Chinese in Malaysia, witnessed this rise of Malaysia's nationhood. As a Chinese Malaysian he is affected by the tide of events. Syd Harrex suggests that:

Lee Kok Liang's fiction has emerged out of his response to, and evaluation of, the ethnic psychology and communal values of the Straits-Chinese, and that his characters illustrate his own disenchantment both with that community and Malaysian society in general. ¹

This chapter focuses on psychological suffering. Lee chooses to explore this through the figure of the misfit who keeps recurring in his fiction, and so becomes the image of the cultural dislocation experienced by the Chinese. The portrayal, in painful detail of various kinds of social misfits, the dispossessed, the alienated, the displaced, the guilt-ridden, the self-exiled, the nightmare sufferer, the thief, the murderer and the mad, demonstrates Lee's:

social concern dominated by interest in and compassion for the individual predicament that has grown out of it. ²

It also serves as the means for Lee to express his view that the psychological violence imposed on people as a course towards a political goal results in a more tragic violence, that of self-doubt and self-hate.

Most of Lee's protagonists are given no names. They are presented as types or as a statement of their insignificance in an uncaring and impersonal environment. When they are given a name, it is frequently an ironical one. For example, 'Kung Ming' is a name Lee gives to protagonists in two different stories depicting two separate examples of suffering. The original 'Kung Ming' is the marvellous person of China's greatest historical novel, 'The Romance of the Three Kingdoms' by Lo Kuan-Chung. He is Lo Kuan-Chung's idea of a great scholar, a superior man of letters, a capable statesman, a shrewd diplomat and a resourceful military strategist. His king visited his tent forty-three times to ask him to come out to help him. When he came out he took
over the generalship of every political and military campaign, proving to be far sighted in his predictions and ingenious in his stratagems. He is described as a person with supernatural accomplishments. As a result he appears to succeeding generations as a semi-divinity endowed with magic powers.

Kung Ming of 'When the Saints Go Marching' does not come within a mile of the shadow of the historical Kung Ming, for he is a weak man unable to control his sensual nature. He is also a man tormented by guilt, which has tinted his view of life and his response to his surroundings. Against the backdrop of several anniversaries of the nation's day of independence Kung Ming remembers his enslavement by his feelings of guilt and bitterness. The story begins as he is on his way home after a stressful day at work weighed down by the heat and humidity. The first thing he sees as he approaches his home is the tottering roof of his house which mirrors his tottering feelings about himself, and his increasing sense of failure (manifested in his increasing pain):

When he saw the roof, he felt a slight throb at his temples...the great roof grew in size and dirtiness. It sloped sharply down, mottled with blotches....He held his breath as the pain came to his right temple like a hammer blow. Two days ago, he had stared helplessly at the roof. It seemed to move as though riding on a crest of some unseen wave as he approached and threatened to heave itself over the tall hedge.  

The roof as a symbol of shelter and protection is falling apart and threatening to crash on him. Likewise his sense of guilt stems from the fact that he had violated the laws of protection which he was supposed to extend to his sister-in-law, Siew Choo, and his wife, and it is threatening to crush him. His inability to control his sensuality has led him to be alienated from society. Lee portrays him with unsentimental honesty. Kung Ming's unbridled sensuality is a sign of his not being in control which in turn is a symptom of his inability to cope with the demands of social conventions.
Ironically, on the day when his nation celebrates independence, he causes his sister-in-law's, his wife's and his own enslavement. His sister-in-law, traumatized and shamed by Kung Ming's sexual assault of her, hangs herself, and his wife, who is the first to find her sister, goes mad. The deed was done seven years ago. Now he takes care of his wife because his guilt will not permit him to send her to a mental institution. From then onwards, on each independence day he remembers with bitterness his predicament and during his wife's bouts of violence he swallows his impatience:

Hadn't he suffered enough for something he never wanted to happen? A quiver of cold fury rippled through his frame....and when calmness returned, a new sort of bitterness and contempt lingered like a harsh taste in his throat....Everything seemed so hopeless and grey. (DC, 113)

His guilt has led him to the most negative of passions, self contempt and the feeling of despondency. His last frantic thought is that everything would be alright 'if only Siew Choo were alive'.(DC, 129) Therefore as the country celebrates liberation, there is none for him. The title 'When the Saints Go Marching' is ironical because neither is the protagonist a 'saint' nor the occasion a remembrance of liberation. This Kung Ming is a corrupt man unable to control himself, trapped in his own lusty nature and consequent self-destructive guilt.

The Kung Ming of 'A Pack of Cards' is almost like the one in 'When the Saints Go Marching'. It is as if Kung Ming of one story is an extension of the other, or an alternate one, living an almost parallel life. Both characters first make their appearance in the evening, a time suggestive of the intense heat and humidity as well as of exhaustion from work. Both characters reluctantly go back to their mad wives whom they treat with patience and amuse in the garden by playing cards. Both of them came from Java to settle in Malaysia, building houses with 'wooden gates in front' and planting 'yellow alamanders' for their bright colours. But here the parallel ends.
The wife in 'A Pack of Cards' 'hates children' and considers them to be nasty creatures. It is because of children that she goes mad. Her first birth in which her child dies is a difficult one. It traumatizes her considerably:

She had a baby again. It was a mistake. After that she cringed when he touched her. When she bore a son, she locked herself in the room, neglecting the daughter. (DC, 136)

She equates children with conjugal activities which result in the hardship of giving birth and recoils from her husband. One day he finds her trying to kill her son in his bed:

[She was] standing by the bed silently looking down. The child was struggling under a thick pile of the white waxy frangipanis [the flowers which she had held as flowers of the dead], one small hand waving free in the air, whimpering. (DC, 136)

From that day onwards, he takes on the demanding job of taking care of his children and his mad wife. As the title 'A Pack of Cards' suggests, this operation is a very delicate one. A slight imbalance would lead the cards to tumble down. An imbalance does occur and his children are alienated from him as a result. His care of his wife is exhausting and time consuming. His children are emotionally neglected. The extent of this emotional neglect is seen in his daughter who becomes emotionally dead to him. She, who was even tempered as a child:

neither cried nor flared up when his wife slapped her some years back. Kung Ming had forgotten what it was all about. But he had stood by silently when it happened. Since that day, his daughter slowly withdrew herself from him and the more he took care of his wife, the more isolated his daughter made him feel. (DC, 141-142)

His own son who is not close to him as a child can not be close to him as an adult. He does not want to be a part of Kung Ming's business which would mean that he has to continue his father's work. He would rather be independent by joining the police force which means that he would be sent away to another town for training. His intention is to leave home.
Kung Ming has alienated his children through his preoccupation with his wife because he feels guilty that she should be insane due to his conjugal privileges and her experience of childbirth. He is a long-suffering man who has nothing left but a sometimes violent, insane wife. All looks bleak. When he goes to bed that night he asks his servant to remember 'to put out the lights', suggesting that the household is dead, especially emotionally.

Both Kung Mings are sufferers burdened with mad wives as a consequence of their own actions. Both seem apart yet the same, one transforming into the other. One is not better or worse than the other; one suffers the pain of intense guilt the other that of excruciating loneliness. Thus, these two Kung Mings are very different from the Kung Ming of history, and by calling them Kung Ming, their inadequacies and their flaws become more glaring and abominable, their name a mockery and their lives a humiliation.

Lee recounts another example of guilt which leads to alienation in a quaint story called 'Five Fingers'. A nameless old man referred to just as 'Old Fellow', in response to provocation by his inquisitive chess mate over his apparently anti-social status of being unmarried, shows him a beautifully lacquered box which contains his secret:

there, lying on the velvet bottom, was a hand. A female hand, embalmed. It was cut off above the wrist where the flesh appeared to be mutilated and dark brown. (MS, 2)

He recounts his painful story. It is oppressive social and traditional proprieties which make the owner of the severed hand and his love a forbidden one. She is rich and he poor. She is a little older than he but above all they have the same surname. So they love in silence. During the war they live next door to each other and one night through a hole in the wall which separates them he discovers her hand and catches hold of it. Her fingers explore his face and play passionately and with love on it. 'Night
after night' they express their love through the medium of the five fingers until one day news arrives that the city has fallen and that the soldiers are coming to the village. He begs her to stay, which she does. But this is ill fated, for the next day her family is massacred and she is raped and killed by the soldiers:

He heard screams, pleading, helpless screams, from the next room. He rushed out; but a soldier smashed him down with the butt of the rifle. When he recovered they had all gone. (MS, 5)

He finds her:

Lifeless. Spattered with blood. It was all his fault. All his. He had to go away. But no. In a daze he went to the kitchen and took from the table a butcher's knife. He returned to her. He held the knife high up. It came down and he laughed. (MS, 5)

The tragedy of 'Five Fingers' is that their love is doomed by a society that still clings to a belief that might have been valid a few thousand years ago but has little meaning now -- that Chinese must not marry people of the same surname on the basis that they might be marrying close relatives. But the irony is that they can marry even first cousins if they do not have the same surname. This has to do with the Chinese attitude to lineage and heritage. Daughters' children who are regarded as being outside the family are considered distant enough to marry. With that act of severing her hand from her body, the narrator severs his tie with cruel society. His alienation takes the form of his remaining single all his life and not wanting to be part of the society that has brought him such sorrow. By not marrying he does not produce any children for the continuation of his family and his name. Instead he keeps the mutilated fingers as a reminder of his lost love and his eternal punishment. Thus, the innocent jibes and questions of the narrator are as knife wounds which keep his heart bleeding. His alienation makes him choose the dead rather than the living, the past rather than the present.
The rejection of the oppressive force of tradition is illustrated in 'Death is a Ceremony'. Through the eyes of the two main characters, one, the eldest son, the other, the eldest grandson of the woman around whose dying and subsequent death the family has gathered, we gain insight into the cultural practices of the Straits Chinese.

The grandson, Baba (once again not a specific name, for Baba is the general term given to the Straits-born male), a thin-looking boy, assumes special importance as the family prepares for grandmother's death. Being the eldest grandson, he has an important place in the hierarchy of the family during the coming funeral ceremony. It is this special importance that makes him the butt of jokes and the cause of envy of his female cousins. Throughout the story he is constantly mocked and derided by them, and watched by his elders. His important place in the family comes with greater responsibility. His uncle chides him wrongly:

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? With granny so sick and you the eldest one. Instead of behaving, you bully the girls.' (DC, 8)

His dying grandmother wants to see all the children. But she misses Baba. It is important that she sees him for the last time to ease her mind that all will be in order after her death:

'I want him now. I want to tell him that I will not give him any red packets next year as a punishment. I will give his share to his brother.' (DC, 15)

This is significant because to give his share of the Chinese new year money, a token of good health and prosperity (the red packet), to his brother would mean that Baba has lost favour and lost rank. When he comes before her his childish fear of the look of death overcomes his rank. He will not go near his grandmother. But he is dragged towards her inspite of his desperate pleas:

'Nearer so that I may hold his hands. Then he'll know how much granny loves him.'

'Let me go mother. Let me go, please.' (DC, 16)
His grandmother fondles him and he struggles. Suddenly she takes a turn for the worse because of all the activity. She coughs and then dies in the struggle:

'Mother, Mother. I have seen a devil. Take me away. Take me away,' he cried wrenching his hand from her hold - 'Devil. Devil.'

All at once it seemed the room stirred. His mother slapped him hard on the face. The maidservant cried. Grandmother slumped back into the bed, coughing and coughing, blood all over her chin. (DC, 17)

His privileged position comes with the price of being traumatized. The family expects him to behave as the oldest. While he is undergoing terror at being 'fondled' by grandmother, 'at the back one of his cousins [gives] out a tiny giggle'. His mother slaps him not to get him out of his confusion but to punish him for grandmother's bad turn. When he most needs an understanding hand, he is given a vicious slap. And for as long as he stays within the extended family he will be expected to play his part as eldest grandson. For him, this privileged position is not only an added responsibility but also a cause for ostracism by his cousins.

Unlike Baba, his uncle (one he did not even know existed), his grandmother's eldest son had escaped the family years ago. He has come back for his mother's funeral (so his mother's wait for him is a futile one):

He had left this world years ago, releasing himself from its coils, going against his mother's will, running off like a wounded rat. (DC, 2)

The analogy Lee draws between the extended family and rats in which everyone knows the other's business and in which one is stifled by traditions is an acutely insightful one:

There were so many rats in his days and they had come from all corners and drains and holes and crevices, squeaking, and scurrying through the night, as he slept alone, away from his brothers and sister, away from his
mother and dreamt that he would find some place where he could dance and yell as much as he wanted to and there would be no more rats. There would be no greed. There would be no dirt and rats anymore. He ran off to the big city some 500 miles south and learned modern ways. He never married but somehow yearned for a son. (DC, 2-3)

Thus, his relatives come from everywhere -- 'holes' and 'crevices'. The 'rats scurrying in the night' suggest that some of them are not honest nor upright people. He has been a lonely boy as he sleeps 'alone' and has wanted to be free from the shackles of duty to 'dance and yell as much as he wants'. He has hated the bickering of family members as they display petty jealousies in his wish for no more greed. Therefore he runs away to the big city. (This is identifiably Kuala Lumpur because it is 500 miles south of Penang, a place where the Straits Chinese call their sons 'Baba'.)

His self-exile is at best a choice he made, at worst, an unfulfilling existence. For 'he never married', suggesting that he fears attachments and ensuing relatives and traditions, 'but yearned for a son', indicating that within his heart, there are stirrings for continuation, that is, the creation of relatives and tradition. Now he is back with his relatives and townsmen and he feels:

a great loneliness among these people who talked about rice, cars, and praying for great wealth from the gods. (DC, 4)

At the funeral, he notices his sister's son Baba and realizes what the little boy is going through -- all the expectations, all the tradition and relatives. He goes to him and invites him to visit him in the city when he is grown up. He also gives him something which he had picked up from the coffin which his sister had thrown into the coffin for cremation. It is shining like some 'ugly oily beetle', the remains of the gold and diamond brooch which is to be significantly given to the eldest on his wedding day. Thus, the deformity of the brooch is equated with the deformity suffered by the self-exile, yet another misfit in a savage society. The point Lee seems to be making is that
the family imposes painful choices on its members. To live in it and meet its exceptions is a kind of deformity, but exile from the family and its demands is equally deforming.

'Return to Malaysia' depicts another misfit. This time he sees his home town with an eye that has been influenced by his sojourn abroad. Another nameless protagonist recounts his experiences when he comes home. The story begins with his proclamation that his bicycle has been stolen. The loss of his bicycle seems to be a metaphor for the loss of his old self. As the story unfolds, his vain search for his bicycle becomes the mirror of his vain search for his old self -- as he realizes little by little how much he has changed. Although he does not feel violently different he, nonetheless, has been changed by his expression of quiet resignation at the loss of his bicycle:

I stayed back home. As I paced slowly in the front hall. I cursed myself in a low voice, out of everyone's earshot, of course; for, if my uncles and sisters-in-law were to overhear my soft-spoken oaths, they would at once think I was going mad.

They expected curses to be loud and aimed at something external to the self. Only mad people, they would say, cursed themselves. Unfortunately I had acquired this self-cursing habit from my stay abroad, but I kept it hidden from them; it was no use trying to explain. (MS, 126)

His appraisal that his habit is 'unfortunate' is an indication that he feels unlike his own kind anymore and consequently he will be treading a solitary path. This difference will manifest itself a few more times as he moves among old haunts and pays visits to old familiar faces. He recalls with subdued amusement his search for his bicycle, for the principle of the matter is that what is lost must be recovered, but he is jeered at and insulted:

I asked everyone: I walked from cluster to cluster, but the children shook their heads vigorously....I even stopped some cyclists on the road to find out if they were riding on my machine; some shook their fists at me as
He then describes his mounting frustration and disproportionate anger, and his shouting match with the long-haired local boys:

My voice was full of anger: Somehow I didn't care much for my bicycle when I shouted. I just wanted fair play, I felt. Theirs, on the other hand, were full of fun and mischief and their answers were mocking and merciless. In a way, it was a hopeless contest. They had been used to losing so many things, and this was my first loss.

This brings home rather sharply to the narrator the difference between himself and the boys, and he realizes that attitude has been shaped by lifestyle, and that his has been different for so long. At last he concedes defeat and abandons his search for his bicycle.

His journey into old haunts constantly reduces him to the part of an observer. For example when he goes to one of the eating places one night, the sensuous assault is overpowering:

The smells were so terribly and intricately mixed: the good and bad smells became almost indistinguishable.

The crowds were so thick that I could not get a chair. It was almost impossible to move freely in these surroundings; I had to sit down as quickly as possible.... I shouted several times; the waiters ignored me....so I sat and watched.

His visit to old friends proves unfulfilling too. They did not talk about the same things anymore so after a short bantering, and 'a few more desultory remarks [he] left them'. (MS, 137) Visiting his relatives turns out to be an aimless exercise for they are
trivial and their frivolous chatter drains him. Their parting comment is an inconsequential remark that: 'the price of cheroots has gone up again'. (MS, 139)

However, it is during his visit to a woman whose talk he had enjoyed in the past that he feels his difference. When he calls on her, the scene that greets him is distressing:

She was sitting on a stool, her arms hugging a huge earthen jar in the corner. Her torn sarung was wrapped round her body under her armpits. She did not see me.

In front of her, above five feet away, was a slight depression on the floor. A puddle glinted in its corner like an evil eye. A tiny shallow drain fed the water away but the egress was blocked up with rubbish and cans. She was lying beside the puddle. (MS, 140-141)

He learns from her son that she has been stricken with an unknown disease which has left her legs paralysed and her speech impaired. Poverty and disability sentenced her to her condition of torn clothes and living in unsanitary and dirty surroundings. The only words she can utter are those which question the narrator in a most painful and laborious manner:

'Why can't I talk? Tell me. Why....can't I talk now?' (MS, 141)

The last he sees of her are her eyes, 'wide-open and red with checked tears'. All he can do is to utter a platitude which both he and the woman know to be futile:

'Don't worry you'll soon get well,' I said. I walked out swiftly. The red piece of paper was flapping gently in the breeze. (MS, 141)

Her only hope is to cling to the 'red paper', a traditional Chinese sign for good luck, because if the reality of a cure is futile, at least the facade will sustain her.
Society which makes victims of the poor and helpless leaves the onlooker totally impotent. On his return to Malaysia, the narrator experiences the many facets of impotency; from his own gestures which can be easily misinterpreted to his surrender to the boys in a shouting match, from his inability to have a meal-order taken to his helplessness in the face of his friend's pain. And so he treads a lonely path. He has chosen to return, but the loss of his old self makes him an alienated person for he has lost the means to cope with the reality of his society.

The dispossessed and the discriminated against are well portrayed in 'Ibrahim Something'. As mentioned previously, when Lee gives his protagonist a name it sometimes carries a symbolic meaning. 'Ibrahim' is the Muslim version of 'Abraham', the patriarch of the Semitic tribes. It is also a very popular Muslim name. Thus the name alludes to the leader of the tribe which evokes qualities of authority and power. 'Ibrahim Something', as we are to learn, fills none of these expectations.

The nameless narrator meets Ibrahim in a hospital during the Japanese Occupation. Instead of a time of building, it is a time of destruction. Far from possessing the strength of a patriarch, Ibrahim is a sick man. The narrator notes that he speaks 'excellent Chinese for a Malay', and that he 'looks like a Chinese'. Ibrahim is a kind man in the hospital, constantly helping his Indian wardmate, Kuppu. But Ibrahim's Malay wardmate always eyes him with suspicion and disdain. At last, the revelation from Kuppu, and the narrator's sudden memory of a past incident piece the mystery of Ibrahim together:

He is Chinese and became Muslim.... (DC, 104)  
...He had left everything and taken a woman. The people in our street had said then that their association would not last very long and that he would soon come back. But that was nearly seven years ago....(DC, 106)
Ibrahim is a brave man who follows his heart and his vision, trying to live a life which avows social and racial tolerance. But he is thwarted all the way. His family disowns him. The Malay man in the hospital rejects and mocks him. His style of derision is particularly hurtful. When Ibrahim's wife comes to visit him:

My Malay neighbour was watching them. He raised his sarong now and then fanning himself between his legs....[she] tightened her knuckles nervously....[she] bent down to whisper to Ibrahim and I could not help seeing how hard Ibrahim had stared at my Malay neighbour. Instead of feeling embarrassed, my Malay neighbour smiled and pulled his ear-lobes with both hands and then fanned himself more vigorously between his legs.

The situation had become tense....(DC, 99 -100)

Pulling the ear-lobes is an Asian sign of being hen-pecked, and in an Asian society it is very humiliating to be considered hen-pecked. The fanning between his legs suggests an even more humiliating insult. Circumcision is both a Muslim ritual and a sign of Muslim identity. It is performed not at birth but as a rite of passage for the young boy. A male convert into Islam must be circumcised and this may have been the most physically awkward aspect for Ibrahim. The Malay man's mocking gestures indicate that his conversion into Islam was not so much due to religious awakening but to a baser instinct, and because of this he allowed his penis, a symbol of maleness and potency, to be mutilated, further indicating that now he is impotent.

It is no wonder that Ibrahim suffers from nightmares. One night the narrator shakes Ibrahim out of a terrible dream about his interracial marriage and his eventual mixed stock. Ibrahim is truly a dispossessed man in society and totally rejected by his own family. Even when he visits his dying brother in the same hospital before his brother's death, his sister-in-law abuses him and accuses him of neglecting his extended family. He is mocked by his Malay counterpart and is constantly bedevilled by terrible nightmares. Finally he retires from society altogether:
slipped into the jungle with the guerrillas, taking his wife with him. (DC, 106)

This seems to be Lee's indictment of a society that will not tolerate change or difference. The jungle, suggesting an untamed wilderness of discomforts and hardship where wild beasts roam, seems a less savage place than civilization where people behave so cruelly. If Ibrahim cannot find acceptance in the company of his community perhaps he will with the guerrillas, suggesting that the oppressive society has forced him to join a politically rebellious group that fights against stronger forces for change.

Lee's short stories depict alienated people in no small way. Not in any grand philosophical discourse but in simple, economical, realistic narratives, Lee has successfully exemplified the psychological pain and agony of the misfits of society. He has used the misfit as the medium for expressing some things which are 'important to him' which he would find impossible to express more overtly in Malaysia. The social and political innuendoes are strong. While it is regrettable that the policies of the Malaysian government strongly muffle discussion and suppress activity, Lee also seems to relate:

the malaise of silence to the debasement of the Chinese tradition in what amounts to an implicit social criticism of the Chinese for contributing to the contemporary moral chaos. 4
Chapter Three

Praying for Great Wealth

Lee's theme of alienation develops beyond expression as a character's inability to cope with society into motifs of tensions between traditional beliefs and modern economic ideologies, between established values and individual worth, and between the old and the young. The Straits Chinese, who populate the world of Lee Kok Liang's fiction, came to Malaysia with their practical brand of religion, that is a balanced mixture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, to which is added a liberal dose of pragmatism.

Confucianism teaches a person to live harmoniously with other people. As it is most important to know one's place in society, much emphasis is placed on adherence to the superior-inferior relationships where the ruler, father, husband and elders have authority over and are respected by their corresponding inferiors: subjects, sons, wives and young people. Thus the traditional Chinese practised ancestral worship, filial piety, respect for elders and a general disregard for the ideas of the young, on account of their inexperience, as a visible manifestation of their knowledge of their place in society. Taoism teaches people to live harmoniously with their surroundings and with nature. One of its doctrines is the balance of negative and positive forces, the Yin and the Yang. It is good when there is a balance and bad when there is an imbalance. Another is the practice of 'wu wei', which means 'inaction', or letting things work themselves out without interference. Thus the Chinese are noted for minding their own business and going their own way, for to meddle or get involved would strike an imbalance in the scheme of things. (This has been a much criticised trait of the Chinese psychological character, for to many, this inaction seems selfish). Buddhism teaches
people to live a good life so that the wheel of reincarnation can stop and they can obtain eternal peace in Nirvana. So the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to Nirvana (right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration), is practised in varying degrees.

Chinese pragmatism regards the acquisition of wealth as a moral good, for it is only through wealth that one can best show respect for one's elders, that one is at harmony with nature in the sense that one is spared the worry about food or shelter and that one can perform good deeds. Thus the Chinese work ethic is an earnest principle, which has been raised to the status of religion. Syd Harrex, in his paper 'Mutes and Mutilators in the Fiction of Lee Kok Liang', gives a concise account of Chinese social values and pragmatism in a new land:

[By coming to Malaysia] the Straits-Chinese, as the name suggests, have had their social identity shaped by their history of cultural amalgamation. Because of their flexible ability to merge into the Malaysian culture, they not only became the 'compradores' of trade and urban commerce but also preserved their ethnic character. Their way of life tended either to remain traditional or, in adapting to British colonialism, became 'modern' and 'educated' according to English models. Through their historical evolution, the family and the clan remained the sources and symbols of 'community'; the individual as 'child' obeyed the code enunciated by the elders through the assumption of hierarchically-bestowed privilege, responsibility and authority. 1

This chapter discusses Lee's evaluation of the traditional Chinese community and their religious practices and the extent to which Chinese pragmatism has led to the tensions that cause further alienation in Lee's characters. In his assessment he subtly comments on the characters' unwitting contribution towards their own social and political suppression.
The most unambiguous reason for Chinese migration to Malaysia is contained in the Hokkien recitation which the grandmother in 'Ami To Fu' often repeats:

*It sounded so lovely so lovely the beginning of man promises of riches in far-off lands junk-stenching dung women with exposed breasts waving before little crying mouths riches coming in shower dig, dig for riches in far-off lands the junk rolls through waves of gold children in sarong - wombs money is modern modern money death is nothing sarong everything the junk rolls into womb of gold ami to fu the wavenightlashes the lightning leaks the baby jets of seaspray modern is not modern can never be without gold sleep is nothing gold is everything wake up wake up the beginning of man wake up wake up.*

This passage, which clearly emphasizes the 'get rich' ethics, makes the title of 'Ami To Fu' an ironic one, for this Buddhist invocation, relates to the spiritual and not the material.

'Ami To Fu' illustrates this Chinese situation well. An extended family flees to the hills and lives in a cave when their town falls into the hands of soldiers. In this temporary settlement, the grandmother stops for a moment to ponder. She thinks about her migration from China and how she has coped. She sees her two daughters-in-law (one pregnant and the other with a small baby and another boy called Silly Q) and notes their difference from her in just one generation:

Dressed up in sarongs why wouldn't they wear trousers when she tried to give them some, so that the climb up the hill might be easier....But she preferred her trousers and bound feet. It was so neat and convenient, and reminded her of her young days. Would she ever return? Could she be really like them. Put on sarongs before she died? (MS, 124).

Before she crossed the seas she was advised to be modern, for example, give up her Chinese way of dressing. She represents the core of Chinese who, though having made Malaysia their home, nevertheless still think of China as their real home. Her dream and the passage of Hokkien prose reveal:
the Straits-Chinese vision of their past; a historical sense deeply embedded in the racial memory. 3

We are given these people's reason for migration, which is largely prompted by their passionate work ethic, 'gold is everything'. We are also shown them undergoing transition from traditional to modern values where 'money is modern modern money'. Their migration, therefore, is a pragmatic act in which wealth takes precedence over all other considerations.

Thus passions and activities are bound to centre upon the unequal ownership of wealth. Silly Q's mother is jealous of her sister-in-law because the sister-in-law has more money. She lists in her mind the areas in which her sister-in-law is wealthier than she and concludes that she is going to humour her for 'she had everything' and must have hidden a lot of money 'somewhere when the soldiers came'. Ironically, she herself is the one who has hoarded gold somewhere, for she has tied a few nuggets of gold around the body of the baby she is still breast-feeding. That is why she will not let go of her the child. And this is the reason for the disproportionate love she shows him. This is blatantly revealed when she declares to her sister-in-law her extremes of feelings towards her two children, namely her indifference towards her elder son, Silly Q, who has been gone from the cave a long time and may be lost, and her great love for the baby:

Her fingers felt for the lumps under the child's clothes. She relaxed. The gold nuggets were still securely tied round the waist. How loving the child was. (MS, 116)

Again when the child is knocked out of her arms when Silly Q runs in with the dog, her main concern is the nuggets:

She pushed herself up and took hold of the child and felt for the lumps under his clothes and counted four. (MS, 118)
In the evening when the child's father returns to the cave, there is an ironic scene of family love as the child is passed to the father to check for the nuggets, for which he is chiefly valued:

....[she], who was cuddling the little one, passed him on to her husband, who held him closely, moving his palms affectionately round the waist beneath the clothes in a queer careful manner. He paused, nodded his head, smiled, and gave the child back to her. (MS, 125)

Her religious conviction is shallow and tarnished by the desire for gold. At best she just pays lip service to its ideals. She has just killed an ant, which was crawling up her leg, with unusual pleasure:

Then she suddenly remembered that Lord Buddha had said that no life should be taken, not even that of an ant. Afraid, she cuddled the child on her lap; she brought her palms together and anguishedly whispered, 'Ami to fu, Lord Buddha'. That was it. She dropped her hands, satisfied. Next time she would burn more joss papers. Why, she would buy captive tortoises and set them free in the river. Excellent idea. That would atone for this sin. And perhaps bring greater luck. Ami to fu, Buddha. (MS, 115-116)

Her notion that a mere incantation could atone for taking a life is certainly a mockery and the expectation of gain in the irony-bound freeing of 'captive tortoises' is an insult. It is a depressing vision of religion corrupted by a desire for material wealth.

The Confucian ideal of adult-child relationship is also distorted here. For bringing a dog into the cave, Silly Q is punished in a most 'face-saving' way which accentuates his pain. He is pinched by his mother three times so severely that he limps out of the cave. His mother exercises the force of parental authority endorsed by her culture without regard to her son's feelings, and worse still, she takes active pleasure in inflicting pain on him.
The characters, in this story as well as in the other stories discussed in this chapter, reveal how the religious ideal they follow is perverted by their pragmatism. This results in society succumbing to a way of life which is:

centred on materialistic success and aggressive survival tactics, in which authority binds the family and the clan but is exercised without consideration for the principle of compassion. 4

As compassion is the quintessence of Buddhism, the title 'Ami To Fu' which means the giving and receiving of blessings relating to peace by invoking the Buddha, is sadly ironic. Here is an example of Chinese communal values in action, and the persistent image is one of moral degeneration and corruption, when the values are stained by the love of wealth. Lee's judgement of his community is harsh.

But the lure of wealth can be repugnant to others. Lee balances his view of the wealth-oriented society with his sympathy for the misfit in that society. In 'Death is a Ceremony' the nameless protagonist returns home for his mother's funeral, after many years of self-exile, an exile imposed by his mother's annoying love of wealth:

His mother had dreamt of gathering the world's gold for him....She was so damned superstitious about it - the wealth that is, lighting joss-sticks after joss-sticks to the gods. (DC, 4)

However, he notices that the society which he left years ago has not changed. But he has and there are a few lessons that he has to relearn. In describing this funeral ceremony Lee documents the aspirations and traditional practices of the Chinese Hokkien community.

Whether in times of joy or sorrow, one's ancestors have to be revered as a sign of respect, and dead or alive, they are all still part of the extended family, the clan. When the protagonist comes back, he is instructed by his second brother that he (the
protagonist), as the eldest, must lead the way by being first to show his respect for the ancestors:

'Remember Big Brother, you have to pray before the household tablets first. Take three joss-sticks. (DC, 2)

He notices his own awkwardness when he holds the joss-sticks after so long an absence:

He nearly would have lost one of the sticks if he had not held them tight. His fingers had become too big for their small stems. They went awry as he knelt down to pray. (DC, 2)

The funeral ceremony itself is a balance of Chinese religious ideas ranging from Confucian filial piety, Buddhist prayers, Taoist rituals to Chinese pragmatism in that since his mother had insisted that her body be cremated, Siamese priests, who are costly, should also be called in. In addition to its religious overtones, the ceremony is also a social spectacle. It is necessary to cry in a prescribed way so that the onlookers approve:

Their wails came in from the outer hall. Ah Tin was crying magnificently. Her words were distinctly heard and the laments drew powerful blasts from her lungs. Kor Por was indistinct and incoherent. She was not a good crier, Sim thought, but then Kor Por was so old. (DC, 18)

This outward show of grief is more theatrical than sincere, but according to traditional Chinese custom, this is necessary as it indicates the measure of one's filial piety. On the other hand, the protagonist's reaction to his mother's death is from the heart and because he is quiet, Kor Por, his mother's sister, dismisses him as being ungrateful and unfilial:

....'He's so changed. And sister loved him a lot too....When he prayed I saw that his fingers were trembling as though he was suffering from malaria.' (DC, 19)
It is sad irony that the one who feels the most should be accused of feeling the least, for it is the most intense grief that makes the least sound. The protagonist feels that it is still the same wealth-orientated and aggressively upward-mobile society that he had left years ago. He remains 'stony faced' in his disappointment. He tells his sister's son:

"...Things haven't really changed. I thought by going away things could be changed. Bye. When you grow up come and see me.' (DC, 23)

The Chinese's excellent ability to adapt is well illustrated in the story 'Dumb, Dumb by a Bee Stung'. This is the literal translation of a Hokkien idiom which signifies total powerlessness in the face of injustice, just like the dumb person who is unable to cry out in pain even though he has been stung by a bee. This story presents Chinese ideals, the people who represent them and the way they cope with problems, vividly.

Mr. Tze, the father of Kuq Tee, had died and according to Chee Beng, the Master of Ceremonies, he had to be brought back to his first home:

to his place of origin, as Mr Tze had certainly moved with success and wealth to the millionaire's row in another part of the city. (DC, 146)

The father had certainly fulfilled a great Chinese ideal, that is, success through wealth. As he was a millionaire, his son had wanted to show his filial piety by giving him the best coffin so that his resting place would be superior:

the dark coffin, heavy and smelling of lacquer on its trestles - [was] the old-fashioned and more expensive coffin of the best wood, guaranteed to last a century and imported from Hong Kong....It was not easy to import a coffin into the country with all the new regulations, but with the assistance of someone who knew the chief men in the Ministries of Commerce and Industries and Finance, he got it just in time. (DC, 152-153)

Lee illustrates the Chinese's superb ability to solve problems. A little string pulling here and a little bribery there can get a wealthy man what he wants. One can view this
as a form of corruption of both the briber and the bribed, but according to Lee, the Chinese view this as prudent business.

The Master of Ceremonies (whose astrological predictions are most valued in any function) has calculated that in order for the succeeding generations to be prosperous and happy the route that the departed takes to its burial ground:

must cross three bridges and go through River Valley Road....The three bridges are to wash away his faults as he crosses their waters. (DC, 149)

This Taoist ritual of the funeral route is most important as it not only ensures that the dead man will find eternal rest but that the living will have a good future. A problem arises because the policeman tells them that they have to follow the police's route in order to prevent any trouble or riot, indicating the volatility present in a multicultural community and revealing an unbending political authority.

Three of the men who are involved in the negotiations for the funeral route are Chee Beng, the Master of Ceremonies, who is also an editor of a Chinese newspaper; the 'Hon'ble' Mr. Kung, a well-known politician, who is a Catholic, but 'nonetheless well at ease in such functions'; and Hin Too, a lawyer, who has a chauffeur-driven Mercedes and rich new industrialists and great housing developers as clients. Both Mr. Kung and Hin Too are English-educated. They represent the far-sightedness of their forefathers when they allowed their children and grandchildren to be educated in the language of the colonial masters. Today they are very successful professionals. Hin Too knows practically nothing about Chinese customs or lore, although he is a 'member of a political party organised to represent Chinese interest'. (DC, 149) This is suggestive of a flaw in many of the people who represent the Chinese in Malaysia in that they are not fully representative of Chinese interests. Thus Hin Too is exasperated when he is asked by Kuq Tee to help him get the police to change their mind. Because he knows little about Chinese customs or lore, he considers the matter to be tedious:
Why was it that it couldn't be simpler? Have the damned thing cremated and be done with it....Not that he didn't have Chinese beliefs. But the whole thing was so messy -- without clarity or economy. (DC, 150)

Hin Too has mixed 'belief' with 'economy' and when it comes to the crunch, economy wins. He is also practising the way of life of a pragmatic Chinese.

Lee satirizes politics. When the first of many telephone calls fails to produce an answer, Chee Beng criticises the authorities:

'....It's funny that he shouldn't know. I don't understand what the authorities are up to now. In the old days things were more efficient.' (DC, 155)

However, Mr. Kung, a politician, springs to their defence, in an exercise in political rhetoric:

'....Those were the old days....Now my office has ten clerks and the State Secretariat about, I think, five Assistant State Secretaries. We work hard. Sometimes they stay back until 6.00 p.m. So many Committee meetings, you know. And we don't do the things the way we want. We must be careful in a democratic society. We must study everything, you know. All angles....Of course, there are always certain things that have to be delayed. It just can't be helped.' (DC, 156)

Bureaucratic overkill is disguised as democratic considerations and inefficiency is dressed up as administrative analysis. When yet another telephone call fails to produce any solution to their problems Chee Beng reflects on the government:

What powers the authorities had nowadays after the great trouble. They needed it of course, but sometimes they seemed to want to control everything....From now on, before he worked out any funeral route, it would be wise if he consulted the police first. No point being stung by the authorities. One could do nothing. (DC, 159)

Here Lee gives voice to the Chinese situation. The 'great trouble' is the 1969 racial riots when a few hundred Malays and Chinese were killed. The Government has since been very nervous about crowds which could generate potential riots. The power with
which the authorities vest themselves is oppressive to the Chinese, as the case of this funeral shows. And the sad line 'One could do nothing' is nothing if not a reality.

Then Mr Hung, the politician, persuades the authority, represented by a Malay, Inche Omar, first in the National Language (to show that one is willing to speak and be proficient in speaking it) and then English (to show that he is an educated man) citing phrases like 'it would be a great moral victory', 'it'll give great confidence in the government', 'No harm done'. When the authorities are still unmoved, Chee Beng comes up with a brilliant idea which saves face on both sides, and solves the problem for the Chinese, thus pleasing everybody. They decide to temporarily change the road signs and build a paper bridge over a side drain along the route. In this way, they are still able to cross their three bridges and the river valley. Thus Kuq Tee's father will have his sins washed away and be ready for the next world, his future generations will be auspicious and the authorities will not be afraid of a riot. This is an example of Chinese adaptability.

However, Lee sees this adaptability as a necessity for survival which has been forced on the Chinese. 'Dumb, Dumb, by a Bee Stung' becomes a scathing satire as we follow the path of the dumb hunchback throughout the story. The hunchback is there at the side tent, where the relatives and friends of the family talk and watch the proceedings of the funeral. He partakes of their food and drink. What is so unusual about the boy is his attraction to the musicians:

....his stare was intent and he stood silently as though his small frame was trying to absorb every note and cadence. He felt so much that he soon forgot his lump and the heat. He had never heard music like this before. (DC,148)

But he is told: 'Get away, you smelly hunchback.' (DC, 148) Hin Too notices his 'rags and sores on his body' and recalls that it is always like this: 'a big funeral and filth everywhere.' (DC, 152) When the Taoist monks are chanting the little hunchback
presses himself among the crowd and gets into the house thwarting Kuq Tee's shout to a man to: 'Get rid of this boy!' (DC, 152) The hunchback watches Hin Too as he makes his telephone calls to help Kuq Tee. Hin Too is annoyed by the boy:

There was something in that fellow's eyes that disturbed him - a stare as questioning as a cat's but glazed over by a film of resignation, defeat or acceptance. Hin Too glanced around and it seemed that the whole atmosphere of the place had been compressed into the stare of that boy. (DC, 153)

A conference between Hin Too, Kuq Tee and his wife sees the hunchback there, and the heightened negotiation between the Chinese and the authorities witnesses his presence. It is here, in the dealings with the political powers that Hin Too realizes that the 'bloody boy [is] probably dumb as well' (DC, 157) because he could not cry out in pain when a stone, which is thrown by other boys, strikes the back of his head.

The final scene is worthy of careful scrutiny as an example of the interplay between pragmatism, comedy and sad irony. Hin Too sees the hunchback who is standing behind Mr. Kuq Tee's wife when congratulations are offered for the success of the negotiations:

That little chap had a strained tight look, small eyes with one of the lids lowered, dark rings below, and the bones on his cheeks fragile-looking under the pallor of his complexion. He seemed to be holding his breath and was pressing the back of his hand against his nose. (DC, 162)

Mr Kuq Tee's wife has farted 'a vile, putrefying smell' and out of embarrassment she turns around and quickly diverts attention by exclaiming to the innocent and helpless hunchback: 'You shameless little goat. You pinched me.' (DC, 162) The other boys, who are more bullies than sensible young men, chase him out of the tent and the last Hin Too sees of the hunchback is him:
He has been attacked by a nest of bees which has been disturbed by a stone meant for the hunchback. As he is taken to hospital, the voices of the boys rise in mockery above the chants of the Taoist monks, 'Dumb, dumb, by a bee stung'.

If the hunchback symbolizes the Chinese, the analogy with their stay in Malaysia is a disturbing one. In the 'funeral' days of British colonialism, the 'hunchback' Chinese (people who are scarred and seeking their fortunes) come to partake of the food (natural resources), music (culture), and negotiations (society and politics) of the nation. But they are not welcome. After the success of the negotiations (independence) they are blamed for an unpleasant incident (the Malay-Chinese issue which led to the racial riots) and are chased away and are stung by bees (laws which suppress the Chinese). But because they are dumb (muffled by the Constitution Act) they can not even cry out in pain.

Lee seems to suggest here that it is the Chinese's excellent adaptability that is the reason for their suppression, for instead of lobbying or rebelling they seem always to find a face-saving solution to a problem and thus diminish their case and their sense of justice in the eyes of the authorities. For if they do not protest or complain it seems as if they are not concerned about the situation. And this pattern of 'wu wei' has led the Chinese to their present situation in today's Malaysia.

The way religion has become mere tokenism with no relevance to its essential teaching is depicted in The Mutes in the Sun. The central irony of the story is the discrepancy between the reality and the ideal, most distressingly revealed on Wesak Day, the ideological core of the book:

Yes it was on Wesak Morning, the day Buddha was born, the day when the souls shed skin. The great
In the name of the god of simplicity and peace, barbarous deeds of looting, abuse and killings have been enacted and opulent temples and pagodas of gold have been erected since he (Buddha) walked among people, all of which are totally irreverent and opposed to the essential teachings of Buddha. Ironically, on this day Met is forced by his father to take a morning walk to see Gaik Lang by the river so he will be prepared for his father's intention to bring Gaik Lang back to the house. Instead of renouncing and practising denials, Met's father engages in indulgence of the flesh, and Gaik Lang who is carrying a life has to terminate it, an act most abhorrent to the Buddha. Also, since Wesak Day, Met's father has forbidden him to visit Kee Huat at home. Kee Huat disappears for no apparent reason. Thus on this day the innocent lives of three young people are wrecked by adults who are supposed to love and nurture them according to the right way of living: Gaik Lang is sold to Met's father by her greedy prostitute mother, Kee Huat is cheated and dispossessed by his gross uncle and Met is forced to meet his future stepmother, whom he later murders. Once again Lee comments on the practice of Buddhism as mere tokenism subject to corruption which is caused by a hunger for money sweeping all morality aside.

'Such a Good Man' is another satire on the abuse of Buddhism. The tale is presented with comic pathos. Ironically it is a story about a doctor who dies because he is not allowed to be cured. Guan Hong is a good doctor and a really good man. Although returned from abroad he has not changed:

He was still the same person they [the townsmen] knew....He went to the temple and prayed before Kuan Yin the Goddess of Mercy....He spoke kindly to the yellow-robed priests....never played cards at all times in his life. He was so devoted to his father and was so studious. (DC, 26)
In the context of Lee's deformed and problematic characters, Guan Hong seems too good to be true. Thus his tragedy seems all the more harrowing. His community is very proud of him, for he is financially very successful, has good social standing, is still very kind to others and continues to be filial to his father. He is also pious and virtuous. By contrast his wife is not an educated women. Although beautiful, she is, in fact, quite simple because she does 'not know many words'. But being the wife of the very clever and successful Guan Hong, everybody thinks that she is clever too. It is her simplicity that leads her to be befuddled by a temple monk. Lee is making a point here that over-simplicity and an unquestioning obedience to any ideology is likely to be counter-productive if not harmful. Guan Hong's wife keeps all the religious observances strictly. Thus when Guan Hong is stricken with a stroke, and later, paralysis, she will not let him go to the hospital on the advice of the temple monk, who suggests that:

Guan Hong must sleep downstairs, and the children be locked in, so that the spirit of the house might come and clear away the demons from the ceiling. (DC, 29)

One can gather that this suggestion smacks of a far darker intent, but the woman is too 'bewitched' to think clearly. One night Guan Hong, hearing noises, loudly 'groaned' for one of his 'locked-in' children to escape from his confinement to check on his wife. The son sees his mother having sex with the monk. The last the town people see of the 'holy man' is when he:

rushed out with his robes torn, smears of blood on his face. Following behind him were Guan Hong's two big boys, each with a long hard stick (DC, 29)

Guan Hong is taken to the hospital that night and dies there. His wife '[knocks] her head on the floor [a correct public act of sorrow and contrition] and [weeps]'. A week later, she takes her children and leaves town. This is a satirical revelation of how simpletons become easy prey for unscrupulous people of persuasive dispositions. In
In this case, Guan Hong's wife would have been especially attentive to the temple's advice as she has been blessed with such good fortune in acquiring a clever and able husband and a rich and comfortable household.

In his stories Lee demonstrates that excessive devotion and obsessiveness are not acceptable, just as superficial devotion and casualness are not tolerable. The most satisfying way is a balance between the two, the Middle Way, as the Buddha taught. Thus, Lee is critical of those who have an over-zealous desire to accumulate wealth and is sympathetic to those who find this offensive. Similarly, Lee believes that politically the Chinese should strike a balance between detachment and commitment. This balance should be made up of prudence and a certain flexibility which, when applied, would make the Chinese situation in Malaysia less disturbing.
Chapter Four

Like a Wounded Animal

Just as one's emotional and psychological pains cause estrangement from one's society, physical pain causes similar separation from one's community. Lee depicts the alienation of his characters through describing their physical pain at the mutilation many of them must endure. The abused, directly or indirectly, is presented over and over again in his stories. Lee's comparison of his human victims with animals and insects leads Syd Harrex to conclude that for Lee:

the human race has both a conscious and a blind, uninformed commitment to Evil, and that Life has a habit of making victims of many of its creatures.  

This chapter explores the image of the abused misfit 'like a wounded animal' (MS, 72)\(^2\) as a reflection of the oppression of the weak, the poor, the helpless, and the voiceless. It is also an image of the suffering of women and a metaphor for the political situation in Malaysia.

Lee's characters populate a world where those in authority -- the family, the wider community and the society at large -- make up a savage and an unfeeling world for the longings and gentle stirrings of the heart and mind. It is a world full of hateful abusers on the one hand and the wounded abused on the other, or as Syd Harrex observes:

At one extreme of both the psychological and social scales are mutes; at the other, mutilators.  

Thus Lee, with his masterly pen and his sensitivity to the sufferers, tears the veneer of pretension and hypocrisy from society to reveal a sad truth. Lee also uses these stories as a metaphor for the migrant plight, especially the Chinese in Malaysia. Except for the child in 'Just a Girl', and the dancers in 'Ronggeng, Ronggeng', all his protagonists are
migrant Chinese who have come to Malaysia in waves since the eighteenth century. They have settled mainly in the urban areas, engaging in business and trade.

While Malaysia was a British colony, the Chinese had seen the wisdom of studying English and adapting to English ways. So as a professional class arose, it was composed mainly of Chinese. After independence Lee underwent a kind of soul searching in the midst of social and political upheaval which took the form of unrest following the government's affirmative action to bridge the economic gap between the mainly rural Malays and the largely urban Chinese and the uneasiness which followed the passing of the Constitution Act after the racial riots of 1969. One way to give utterance to his concerns was to join a political group. Another way of expressing his apprehension was to write and reveal the Malaysian situation in his fiction. He circumvented the problem of the censure on free expression by using the misfit to figure an indirect commentary.

'Ami To Fu' is a tale which recounts layers of brutalization. During the Japanese Occupation, a Chinese extended family escapes to the hills in order to hide from Japanese soldiers, whose spare time is taken up by looking for women. While the women (Silly Q's grandmother, his aunt who is pregnant and his mother who is still nursing a baby) adjust themselves in the cave, Silly Q goes out. He stalks, hits and captures a half-starved dog with his catapult. He takes it home to his mother who has, since he left the cave, rather callously called him 'more stubborn than a toad' and says he should have been nicknamed 'stubborn Toad' instead of 'Silly Q'. She wants to 'let him rot' when she thinks that he is hurt. But the dog, released from the strangling hold of Silly Q:

at once wriggled free and bounced towards his mother... the child was knocked off....and started to bawl, and all the time Silly Q ran like a mad creature in the cave. (MS, 118)
What follows is the chilling episode of calculated torture, all the more horrible because it is done so quietly and sweetly and taken so silently! His mother stalks Silly Q with hypocritical concern:

'...come here, I want to see if you are hurt, dear.'
He walked over to her slowly....
'Come nearer. I want to see if you are hurt.'....
'Say you are wrong, and loudly, so that aunty can hear it. But do not make any noise when I punish you. You toad. Be quiet, understand.'

Her fingers wrenched at his flesh. Once, twice, thrice. She was breathing. What training her boy had. Not a sound. Another wrench. Ah! that was it. She was satisfied.
'I am sorry for -- for -- the trouble I made, dear mother.' (MS, 118-119)

That she does not want her sister-in-law to know how she is hurting her son is significant as another example of hypocrisy and face-saving among rivals. His aunt, who is his mother's adversary in petty jealousies, mocks her nephew:

'Are you hurt, dear?....why you limp badly, as though you were a beggar without crutches.'
'No, I am all right, aunty. I am going after that dirty, foul dog, and kick it on the belly.' (MS, 119)

The fact that he can take this pain so silently and ingratiatingly suggests this is a punishment regularly administered for his alleged misdeeds. He has become hardened by this treatment and his only way out is to kick the dog in turn.

His hunt for and the punishment of the dog is no less horrible as we realize that this is a vicious circle of pain and abuse that will be perpetuated:

He leapt from boulder to boulder, outstripping the dog, still feeling the smarting pain on his left thigh. The dog was tired, he could see that.
He got it at last. He wound his catapult round its neck, and holding its forelegs in his left hand, drew it up, until the eyes bulged out and whimpering, desperate
sounds came from it. He then kicked it deliberately on its rump. Once, twice, thrice. For emphasis, he kicked once again. He released it, satisfied, somewhat.

He stood arms akimbo, watching the dog limp away. (MS, 120)

His brutalizing has toughened him, so he resembles a 'stubborn toad' with the implication that he has a thick skin and a rough, ugly exterior of a potential sadist. But more than the thick skin is his resemblance to a dog which limps away, totally powerless and voiceless. In the pecking order that exists among the characters it is ironical that under the threat of the greater brutality of war and impending molestation of the women these people in the cave inflict their portion of pain on others without remorse. This suggests total insensitivity and callousness.

The most harrowing chronicle of brutality is contained in the novella The Mutes in the Sun. The three main characters -- Met, the protagonist; Kee Huat, his good friend; Gaik Lang, Kee Huat's lover -- are all oppressed by Met's father, a rich owner of a sawmill and 'the most influential person on the School Board of governors.' (MS, 81) Met's father is not only rich and influential but also tough and strong. When he talks to Met in his room, his 'strong jaws', 'flat gaze of the eyes' and 'the rough leathery movements of the cheeks' make Met wonder if his father is 'talking to him or mesmerising him'. He feels 'like some wild fox at the approach of a tamer' and while his father talks he is 'so terrified by the physical proximity of his father that he [understands] nothing.' (MS, 78)

His father manipulates three young people's lives in varying callous ways because of his own egotistical desires. The story reveals his father's desire for Gaik Lang and the intertwining of the fates of Met, Gaik Lang and Kee Huat. On one of his father's visits to Gaik Lang's mother, a prostitute, he hears about Gaik Lang and proposes to buy her from her greedy mother who has seen fit to 'sell' Gaik Lang to him for an agreed sum of money. She is a prostitute and has no qualms about her daughter
entering the same profession. As testified in Gaik Lang's diary, her mother comes in with 'some men' one night and one puts his hand on her shoulder, suggesting that Gaik Lang is beginning to be interesting to men (as she has been to Met's father). Thus Gaik Lang's life seems bleak from the onset as the choices made for her by her mother are loathsome ones. It is therefore ironical that the only relationship she chooses for herself results in an unwanted pregnancy, which she sadly has to terminate, so that she becomes a kind of mutilator.

In a manner calculated to strike fear and impose authority Met's father drags out information from his son about the relationship between his school friend Kee Huat and Gaik Lang. It is a month after their Wesak morning walk by the river to meet Gaik Lang that Met, on a shopping night with his servant in Pulau Tikus, notices a couple, who turn out to be Kee Huat and Gaik Lang, under an umbrella in a heavy drizzle. When he goes home, his father forces him to reveal this discovery. This, of course, is the occasion when Kee Huat takes Gaik Lang to Pulau Tikus, for her abortion. The greedy abortionist had not wanted to perform the deed when she discovered that Gaik Lang did not have enough money. A month after the Wesak day encounter Gaik Lang has her abortion which is made possible by the money Met's father has given Gaik Lang's mother. When Met, in desperation, goes to look for Kee Huat at Kee Huat's uncle's home, he is told that Kee Huat's disappearance is really for his own good:

'Don't worry handsome boy. It's all to Kee Huat's good. I can assure you that. After the report made by your father, what else could we do? Anyway, your father had explained everything to me and I completely agreed with him.' (MS, 85)

We are told at the beginning of the story that the uncle is squandering Kee Huat's inheritance. This uncle, who betrays Kee Huat, is presented as a gross man with 'his flabby chest muscles [wobbling] all the while'. Lee portrays his physical appearance
and behaviour as signs of his moral ugliness. Yet another person has been corrupted by Met's father's money and influence. The uncle has been paid off to exile Kee Huat or throw him out.

Like Gaik Lang's, Kee Huat's life has been manipulated by tremendous oppression and each guardian has been a silent accomplice through the corrupting power of money. Met's father may not have known that Gaik Lang is pregnant and only learns about it, or deduces it, from Met's encounter in Pulau Tikus. He may feel cheated that the girl he has bought is not a virgin, so he is robbed of the privilege of deflowering her by a conniving mother and an upstart boyfriend. He may have had Kee Huat 'fixed'; a man of his wealth and influence can do anything. This is one of the mysteries of the story, but whatever is done to Kee Huat turns him into a senseless mute. I think that Met's father had Kee Huat's tongue cut out as a sign of castration and as an act of punishment so that Kee Huat could not even cry out in pain, just like the hunchback of 'Dumb, Dumb, by a Bee Stung'. Years later, when Met finds him, Kee Huat's only means of expressing a sexual act is to 'piss, gurgling with happiness' (MS, 61) on the spot where an Indian girl has just urinated! Kee Huat, who had a 'film star's face' is reduced to a mindless dummy who can only make 'weird sounds'.

Met confesses his search for Kee Huat to his father and asks for news of Kee Huat:

His father dropped the paper and flashed him a furious look, sitting up erect...he stood tensed and drawn up as if he was being stretched like an elastic...Suddenly without any warning, his father reached out and slapped him on the face, a stinging blow which sent him tottering against the wall. He braced himself up, tears in his eyes. This was the first time his father had ever laid a hand on him cold-bloodedly. He wanted to cry but he checked himself, feeling cold all over his face. (MS, 88)

This brutalizing and unreasonable toughness of the father stems from the fact that he believes that his authority in the house is absolute and not to be questioned. Met's question becomes a challenge which has to be squashed immediately. Hence the slap
that sends him 'tottering'. The reaction of the abused is resentment. And it is from this point onwards that Met's 'flame' of hate is to consume him.

Gaik Lang comes to Met's house to stay about a month after her abortion. During dinner on her first day, Met knows that she is crying in the kitchen:

A soft rhythmic sound wandered from the kitchen, like the mewing of a cat. (MS, 80)

-- another animal allusion. Met's resentment towards Gaik Lang, whom he considers 'ugly' often and a bad influence on his friend, Kee Huat, because she is the daughter of a prostitute, turns to shame as he witnesses his father's action. This becomes a blinding humiliation when he is told by his servant as they look at his dead mother's picture that Gaik Lang is to be his father's new wife. This humiliation, his frustration at not finding Kee Huat and his resentment of Gaik Lang lead him to commit murder.

The comparison of the three young people to animals evokes their plight as victims. Gaik Lang's cry is like the mewing of a 'cat', dejected and pathetic; Met feels like a 'wild fox at the approach of a tamer', when he encounters his father who possesses 'a strange compelling power that [sucks] out the marrow of his will and consciousness' (MS, 76), and Kee Huat becomes a mute. All of them are voiceless and defenceless and cannot even hope to put up a fight against authority: Gaik Lang's greedy mother, Kee Huat's immoral uncle and Met's influential and authoritarian father. In the inevitable and heart-rending climax one dies, another loses his mind and becomes a mute, and yet another becomes a murderer. The story has a wider implication in that it is criticising a culture which demands that young people should always submit to their elders. This authoritarian expectation gives parents enormous power which is easily abused. When the lives of the young are warped by this power, the future of society is threatened as is indicated by the utter degeneracy of Met and Kee Huat.
Lee recounts with compassionate understanding the plight of young girls who are abused. Many stand on the threshold of adulthood looking towards a bright future only to be dashed and betrayed by circumstances, adult insensitivity or greed. They are also betrayed by extremely oppressive social and cultural attitudes towards women. Thus some are either sold into domestic slavery or prostitution, others are brutalized or killed and yet others seek death as the only way out. In each case Lee links their particular suffering with some animal or insect to evoke the pity of their plight.

'The Pei-Pa' describes an old Chinese music player who, oppressed by grinding poverty, has to make a choice between his children. He is a poor man who can hardly make a living singing traditional Chinese songs on an ancient Chinese instrument, the Pei-pa. While he tries to entertain two uncouth men he hears their annoyance with a new prostitute they visited the night before exclaiming that not only was the 'new chick' not worth the extra money, but she was 'not as satisfying as the old hen'. It turns out that the 'chick' is indeed his daughter and he recalls her and her dilemma with sadness:

Some time ago, he thought, a cheek, fresh and young, was wet in his house....the cheeks were wet with what the ancients called jade drops. Yes Chu Choo wept and tried to hide her face when he entered her cubicle that night. Yes, Chu Choo was an obedient daughter. He pitied her. But what could he do? Tsi Char, that jewelled one, was coughing badly now. Chu Choo could fetch a good price. Then, perhaps, Tsi Char could get some good medicine....He had not known what to say to the young soldier. No doubt he had gone away, but he had promised to come back again soon. And Chu Choo would then be gone. (MS, 31)

This reveals the Chinese preference for boys at all costs and the weight of filial piety to the point of self-sacrifice. The son is sick, so the obedient daughter is sold to the oldest profession. The soldier suggests the chance of romance for the girl, but that is to be frustrated for the sake of the boy. It would be unkind to say that the old man
does not love his daughter too. He is very distressed at her plight although for a brief moment he thinks badly of her:

'Why, how do you know? That sounds like her,' the Pei-pa man blurted out. How could that thin fellow know? Was he an agent for the police? Why, he took care that Chu Choo should be disposed of several miles away from the village. Had she run away? That ungrateful daughter of her mother, to think she could do such a thing, after all, he had brought her up. Where could he get the money to refund if he should be approached? These thoughts whirled in his mind, leaving him numbed and undecided. (MS, 33)

It is poverty that leads him to sell his daughter. Yet the choice is his and in the final analysis the Pei-pa man decides that it is better that his daughter should be abused than his son remain ill. Lee is critical of a society in which the disparity of wealth forces a poor, otherwise decent, man to make such an appalling choice.

A similar story relates the exploitation of young girls. Though gentler in tone 'The Glittering Game' still uncovers the world of greed, seedy men and abuse. Mei Fong is a new girl who has just come to work in a topless number in a theatre in town:

Everything about her was smooth and virginal.
She was young, and what was more, she liked to dance. (MS, 143)

Like Chu Choo in 'The Pei-Pa' Mei Fong's journey to the town is to help her family financially:

One day a plump prosperous woman in a silk dress came to the new village and promised [her grandfather] to pay him regular sums monthly. Her grandfather told her grandmother, saying that it was better than 'the other things'...Although she now missed her grandfather, she did not complain because she knew she was helping him. (MS,144)
Her filial piety is exploited by urban greed and her genuine desire to dance is undermined by gross lechery:

since all the other dancers took off their clothes and put on costumes, she did the same. Later on it became a habit with her. (MS, 144)

Her kind of innocence and naivety cannot last long. In the theatre 'the crowd [is] full of men' (142), and soon she is enticed to dance on the 'runway', the prized place to dance, according to her dancing friends. She confides in the conjurer her 'good fortune' and sees him jump up and shout:

'Don't you understand? You must dance on the stage only. Never on the runway. Why that's unthinkable. Stay on the stage. Be happy there. And get away from this place as soon as you can.' (MS, 153)

She does not understand the implications of dancing on the 'runway' and dismisses the conjurer's concern:

'Oh, you're silly. There's nothing wrong! I like to go out there....It makes me so happy. To hear the cheers and laughers[sic]. (MS, 153)

For a man who knows better it breaks his heart to see yet another innocent girl exploited in the arena of greed and lechery. Her desire to dance well and then to hear the applause is, unfortunately, not shared by anyone in this cheap joint. This is the place for the maulers and the lechers, men who see women only as objects for their appetites. She has been tricked into dancing on the runway not so much because she is a good dancer but because she is 'fresh' and 'virginal'. She learns the dismal truth about the place when she dances there. Men are trying to jump on the runway to touch her; they are shouting for her:

'I want her. I want her.'....Everywhere, as she retreated, it seemed pairs of hands shot out and tried to fondle or caress or smother her; then suddenly she realized that she
was supposed to smile at these strange men and win their applause. But her legs would not move gracefully and she stood still, holding the saucers, right in the middle of the runway, wanting to cry out. This made the audience laugh.

Through the music and the sounds of the drums, she heard their unceasing laughter and with a cry she rushed up the stage and vanished into the wings. (MS, 159)

Her illusions are shattered and her humiliation complete. This is the insidious exploitation of the innocent and the naive at its lowest - the promise of a better life for the victim as well as for her unsuspecting family. Ironically, when she confides in the conjurer she insists that he sets his bird in a cage free and the conjurer replies that one day she'll learn to dance so well that, like the bird in the cage, she will not want to fly out. She has laughed at this, and discovers now, that she will never be a good dancer and that she will not be able to fly out of this cheap place. There is also in this story, as in 'The Pei-Pa', an implied attack on a society where the unequal distribution of wealth forces parents to prostitute their children.

'Birthday' relates the story of a young woman whose empty life is predetermined as if it were a commodity by the authority that controls her. She is 'twenty-five years old today...and no one remembers her birthday.' She lives with her grandmother who is repressive. She forbids electric lights in the house, an action which suggests intense resistance to change. She smothers budding femininity in the girl, who must 'tighten her breast-cloth and flatten' 'her breasts which [are showing] under her blouse' or 'Grandmother would certainly talk to her about them if she did not do so.' (MS, 22) Her maternal instincts are also stirring as she now '[flushes] when the baby [stares] at the window', and thinks of how she will be able to take care of one well. Today, ironically, instead of cooking a special meal for herself, she is preparing curry, for a special guest, Uncle Teng, who seems to be talking to Grandmother in a most genial manner. Her cooking is interrupted by cockroaches on the walls and on the wood pile, and there are too many to kill at the moment, for dinner is ready to be served. A
cockroach which flies onto her arm causes her to spill the curry which drenches Uncle Teng's trousers:

Grandmother looked up at once and became very white. Uncle Teng was on his feet, and she rushed for the cloth, mumbling, and quickly wiped the curry off his clothes. (MS, 24)

As a punishment she is to have no food tonight. At twenty-five years of age this punishment seems incredible and on her birthday it is an example of adult insensitivity and cruelty. She sits in the woodpile in the kitchen, hungry, while the rest are eating:

Their shadows were huge and still. She played with her toes and tried to fight back her tears. Something was crawling up her legs. It was a cockroach. She threw it down and squashed it under her big toe. (MS, 25)

And after Uncle Teng has gone, Grandmother stops by her room and announces bitterly:

'Everything was going on as I planned till that thing happened. I am so tired of it all. You'll be a spinster the rest of your life. Clumsy bitch.' (MS, 25)

This reproach shatters her budding maternal instinct and awakens her to humiliation. Once again authority is insensitive to the needs and stirrings of the heart. From the innuendoes at the beginning of the story when Uncle Teng hints at his ambition to have a son, we gather that grandmother has been planning this match for the girl, but Uncle Teng (by virtue of the way he is addressed) is much older than she. So what kind of marriage will it be? Would it be better to remain at home with a repressive grandmother? Either way seems dismal and like the cockroach which she squashes so effortlessly, the girl is squashed by overbearing authority. Thus on a day which should have been a joyous one she passes it sadly with the cockroaches, creatures which seem to mirror her wretched state.
'Just a Girl' juxtaposes the tender care a girl gives to her baby monkey with the callous attitude her parents have towards her. She is the loser in the battle of the sexes, and in the game of survival. Yet another nameless protagonist, this time just called 'the child', is the victim of abuse. According to the poor, uneducated Malays she is 'sick' and always wanting to touch the 'moon in the water'. This implies that she is mentally handicapped. Her father seems to be a dishonest man who cannot earn enough money or keep his house in order. When we first meet him he has just given the police the slip. His wife pleads with him:

'Be honest, Mat, do not cheat again. What would happen if they took you away, now that our son has run away?' (MS, 9)

But he is full of complaints and is indolent, blaming everybody else for his misery. He believes that his child's sickness is a curse from Allah and his son's running away is a curse from the woman Cik Hasnah whom he had spurned many years ago. He sees the baby monkey given to his child by Cik Hasnah as a ploy to break him totally.

One night while his daughter is in a half sleep she overhears her father wanting to send her to 'that big house in the town' -- a mental institution, according to the advice of the bomoh, the village medicine man-cum-magician. He agrees readily because he has been trying to send his daughter away but 'no one in the village will have her'. (MS, 12) The mother pleads with the father to continue to take care of her but he is firm and the girl decides that she doesn't want to go to 'that big house'. Her child-like mind sees only one way for her to go. After a dreamy surreal half-sleep she takes her baby monkey back to its mother and goes to the river 'to find the moon' and stay with it.

The water was cold when she lowered herself down from the bathing stage. (MS, 14) Her suicide is all the more appalling because her child-like mind can only distinguish between love and rejection, and she feels her rejection so acutely that she prefers to seek 'the moon', unwittingly killing herself.
This episode illustrates the natural feeling of care for a helpless creature in the image of the baby monkey. The child cares for it and takes it back to its mother when she wants to go to the river. Ironically, her parents, who should be taking better care of her in her sickness, think of her only as a burden. The image of the tied-up monkey mother, concerned about its child, is a distressing contrast with the child's parents who totally disregard their child. Her father is biased towards his son and 'will forgive him everything' if he returns -- another example of the privilege accorded to male children. His wanting to send the girl away seals the family's misfortune.

The image of the baby monkey and its chained-up mother signifies the chains of poverty which keep people oppressed. In this story ignorance and a large dose of indolence, on the part of the father, have kept the family in the lower ranks of society and misery. It is a sad fact that here only a person who has a child-like mind can do the right thing. The contrast with the girl's father is acute. One, innocence personified and the other, a cheat, a lazy and irresponsible man, who dispenses with his only child at home because she is 'just a girl.'

'Bandit Girl' depicts the brutalizing of another unnamed young girl by a brutal father. The opening shows how she faces her execution:

No one could tell what emotion lay behind the girl's eyes. Love could lie there -- or cruelty. She was just a kid. But she had a stubborn heart....Her eyes were large and brown, they gazed and gazed at everything, slowly and carefully, full of pain and sorrow. (MS, 15)

By this time she is so brutalized that latent emotions lie totally dead in her.
Her father has always been her hero and he is the strongest man in their village, so it is understandable that she prefers to ally herself with an image of strength and authority rather than with one of meek submission:

Every evening....she prayed and prayed that one day she could be as tough as [her] father. (MS, 16)

One day she asks:

'Father, what makes you tough?'
He put down his bowl quietly and stared at the little girl. Suddenly he raised his arm and slapped the girl hard on her face, knocking her down. He resumed eating and grimaced at the girl on the floor.
That makes me tough, little girl.'
Thank you, Father.' (MS,16)

The father of the story, being the strongest man of the village as well as a guerrilla, is a tough and hard man. He would have little time for sentiments or compassion. His response to his daughter's request by slapping her is both a sad truth of his position as a rebel as well as his inadequacy as a loving father. This is the beginning of the girl's training. She goes to the fields with her father when she is eight, feeds the pig, digs the earth and carries water to the fields for miles when there is a drought. The day she knows that she is tough is the day when she volunteers to kill a pig for her 'soft-hearted' mother, who had wanted her to be 'gentle', 'to learn to stitch, embroider and comb her hair beautifully' and 'to marry a rich man' and live comfortably. But all these are foreign to her and she insists on killing the pig:

Her aim must be swift and sure....at the vital spot on the pig's throat. The pig grunted. Her mother still sobbed. Then the dagger came down....She felt a comfortable sensation as the hard steel sank into the soft pulpy mass of fat....That was all. The blood squirted out in a jet. She loved the sight of it. She took the dagger and stabbed and stabbed. Her mother shouted:
'Don't do it, unholy child. It is dead, can't you see?'
'Oh, mother, I want to practise. I love to kill the bloody thing, even if it's dead.'
'May God help you, my child. May god help you.'
(MS, 18)
Her actions indicate the calculating, cold-blooded and heartless person she has become through her brutalization. She becomes tougher than even her father who had died years ago. She presses hungry rats on the soft unprotected belly of captured corrupt officials and she loves to hear them squeal for mercy when she hammers sharp little bamboo strips under their finger nails. So tough is she that even toothless Tiger Face, the most fearsome bandit, acknowledges it. But at the moment when most young girls are budding and standing on the threshold of new awakenings she is captured and beheaded.

This is the most excruciating account of what might have been. Years ago, a gentler word or act from a much admired father might have changed her. The innocent love and hero-worship of a child is so potent that when she is slapped she sees that as the right kind of behaviour. All the natural instincts of softness and love are totally squashed at a very young age in order to be like her hero-father. Thus the responsibility of adults is great. Lee seems to say that brutality will not just breed brutality but will totally dehumanize the victim. He is also saying this in the context of a politically brutal situation. The core of the story is the moment of her departure from what is natural. She loves the squealing and the sight of blood. She kills the pig and stabs it again and again, even when it is dead. Her mother rightly calls her 'unholy child'. Yet she is not so much the abuser as the abused, for, like the pig, she is led to the slaughter of her true and natural self; stabbed again and again by each act of cruelty and toughness which is expected of her. When she is beheaded we feel a sadness instead of a relief for she is 'so pretty and young'. (MS, 19)

The sad fact of the bandit girl is that she is faced with only two very limited choices: to be brutal like her father or to be meek and submissive like her mother and, as many of Lee's other stories show, pretty, feminine women are equally prone to brutal degradation. This is the case of both Siew Choo in 'When the Saints Go Marching' and Gaik Lang in The Mutes in the Sun. Both are objects of men's lechery.
Siew Choo is raped and Gaik Lang is bought as a commodity. Both of them are likened to a 'bird'. Siew Choo, 'a yellow bird' (DC, 123) and Gaik Lang, a 'troubled bird'. (MS, 67)

Siew Choo is not the only victim in Kung Ming's house. The servant girls, by virtue of their lowly status, are also abused by him. On one occasion when Kung Ming passes his house-maid's room with indecision, he recalls other maids whom he has violated:

Was it Ah Pin who stammered as she hurriedly locked her door, or Ah Kim with heavy knowing glances....or Ah Poh who banged on the front door gates wanting to get out? So many, it seemed. (DC, 128)

Gaik Lang, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, is a victim of a powerfully rich and influential man whose initial desire for her turns to possessiveness and then emotional blackmail. She plans her death by antagonizing the man's son who eventually kills her on her wedding day.

Like birds, these women are trapped, their wings clipped by the abusers and they cannot have any way out for who would open the door of their cages? The only way for them is to die within the cages and a number of them seek that way out. These episodes are powerful indictments of the society where power, especially male power over women, money or authority is abused and the victims can seek only death.

Further, in 'Ami Tu Fo' the chain of brutalizing continues after Silly Q has kicked the dog that has been the cause of his abuse. Out of anger and unfounded self-importance he chases a girl who is hiding in the hills because he doesn't want another person in his cave. When his father comes home, he announces that the family is safe for the while because the soldiers have already got a girl whom they find in the hills:

....'Have you heard the good news? The soldiers are gone!...They got one girl in the hills today. Luckily they
As one girl is sacrificed to the soldiers the rest are saved. Once again she could have been saved if Silly Q had not been pinched, and did not feel so horrible. The wider implication of this episode is that even in a time of crisis those who are rich are saved as depicted by the women in the cave and the poor are victims of the selfishness of the rich as depicted by the girl who is caught by the soldiers. So in the event of tragedy, one is quick to ask: Where does the blame lie? Presumably, in part with the situation which creates the war and also with the social inequalities of a society which unduly privileges wealth and social prestige.

Lee depicts these abused characters laying bare the facts, the depth and extent of human endurance and ability to suffer, and the horror of human cruelty. His tormenting images of suffering animals and squashed insects give voice to an otherwise voiceless section of society. His mastery lies not so much in the solutions which he seldom gives but in the bringing to our awareness the plight of the voiceless and the extent of the brutalizing force of power and money. Again Syd Harrex's comment on Lee's view is clarifying:

Clearly, Lee Kok Liang does not take an optimistic view of the communal and political system, given that so many of his authority figures are oppressors who morally, psychologically and physically mutilate those rebels and recalcitrants over whom they exercise power. Thus, in the contemporary political climate of Malaysia, in which Malay nationalism and Chinese self-assertion are rival forces, the Chinese tend to air their grievances in hushed and muted tones. Therefore the image of the mute - a creature silenced by nature, fear, communal pressure, or political authority - is potent with political implications. 4

Thus, the body that suffers, like a wounded animal, is not just the muted state of the victim's but also the unexpressed and stilled voice of a large migrant section of a multi-cultural nation still searching for and defining a true identity.
Chapter Five

Blistering With Sweat

In his fiction Lee is preoccupied with descriptions of the body and its functions, in particular sweating and sexual desires. While sweating is a natural function, profuse sweating, as experienced by Lee's characters, is suggestive of disorder. Likewise, an excessive sexual drive serves as the expression of a lack of self control. Lee employs the heavily sweating body and the compulsions of male sexual desire as signs of an inability to cope, and as physical expressions of alienation.

A characteristic of Lee's misfits is that they sweat, rather profusely too, and often leave tell-tale marks as signs of their physical discomfort and their involuntary surrender to their environment. Most of Lee's characters sweat because of the heat. All his stories are set in Malaysia which is situated in the torrid zone with an average daily temperature of 33°Celsius and a humidity level of 80%. Therefore, as heat is the first factor that confronts visitors to Malaysia, leaving them with no doubt that from then on their activities will be affected by it, so heat is the first encounter the reader has with Lee's sensorily evoked literary landscape.

It is interesting to note here that at least six of Lee's stories deal with heat in the opening lines, setting the tone for the ensuing narrative. 'It's All in a Dream' is about political power. The protagonist is to be carted away for the security of the country, in other words, to be exiled for a few years. After having been detained and questioned he confesses his actions. The transition from imprisonment to release (even though it is to exile) is well depicted by the movement into the sun by a man who is self-controlled and knows to keep his urges in check. The following passage depicts the
beginning of the life of a man who must always control his thoughts and actions in order to live out of confinement (in the sun):

Crinkling his eyes against the sun's glare that bounced off the dark shiny surface of the platform...he carefully noted the passengers as they climbed on to the train. His right hand remained in the pocket of his grey trousers, fingers resting on the unopened packet of cigarettes. He would wait until the train pulled out before smoking. His lips were dry and he smiled softly to himself as he thought that he would have a drink anytime he wanted....He restrained himself, prolonging his thirst, an exercise of will. He felt his smile growing tight on his face. 1

The time of the day when the heat is most intense is juxtaposed with the time of great upheaval and hardship -- the Japanese Occupation in Malaysia. The opening lines of 'Ibrahim Something' herald a story about upheaval and the glaring pain of dispossession and confusion:

Afternoon
During the Japanese Occupation I was sent to a hospital.
I woke up in a narrow bed -- feeling parched and conscious of tiny veins beating at my left temple -- and mistook the thrust of the afternoon sun through the doors for white and menacing hospital beds.
'Arrgh' A sound of someone belching.
I raised my head. (DC, 93)

In the next story 'When the Saints Go Marching' the time of day is late afternoon, but it is the hour of the most intense humidity and in the tropics it usually rains around this time as the clouds have reached saturation point:

Lifting up his left hand Kung Ming glanced at his watch. 5.30 pm. He was still on time. (DC, 107)

This introduces the story of a man who is weighted down by guilt.
The images of heat are associated with decay and sickness in *The Mutes in the Sun*, a story about a deformed society and the voiceless characters who suffer immeasurable sorrow at the hand of an oppressor. As the title suggests, the sun is seen as an all powerful, merciless oppressor that becomes the metaphor of the all powerful oppressor in the story -- Met’s father:

All through the week the vast dark cloud with silvery scalloped edges sat over the city by the sea, slowly showering and depositing particles of heat. The tar on the road burnt the soles of the feet. Sweat lacquered the features of the inhabitants. The leaves in the trees grew wary and yellowish and dropped in large indolent spirals. In the evenings when the sun filtered in beneath the edge of the cloud as through the bottom of a closed door, the men drew out their stools and sat in the open, fanning their armpits carefully, like doctors dabbing swabs on an open wound. Faces blank, eyes drooping, they breathed in shallow gasps, waiting for the hot season to end. (MS, 36)

The sun’s image as the oppressor is ironical because in much English and European writing, sunshine carries positive associations, but here it is related to a sick society of degenerate people. The heat is depicted as a decaying element both day and night. Thus, the leaves turn 'yellowish and dropped' and the people fan themselves as doctors dab 'swabs on an open wound'. Faces remain 'blank' and eyes 'drooped'. Houses' paint 'peeled' and walls 'cracked':

Even the girls in this part of the city began to shrivel from the age of sixteen onwards. Daily the sweat gathered in drops all over their bodies....Daily their skin lost its shine....The bad food did the rest. (MS, 37)

In 'Ami To Fu' the opening line -- 'He grasped his catapult and strode out into the sun.' (MS, 1-3) -- alludes to two classical episodes: that of David going out to encounter Goliath and that of the caveman of Plato turning around into the sun of knowledge. The ironical truth is that the boy called 'Silly Q' is no hero or enlightened person but a brutalized child who in turn brutalizes other weaker creatures.
In 'Just a Girl', purgatorial heat is the signifier for the anguished world of the mentally handicapped child who is to be sent to a mental institution by her own parents. The nightmare of 'boiling water' and heat of a girl who is very much like a trapped animal becomes a reality when she commits suicide by drowning:

The monkey rattled its chain when she passed by. She must be near Cik Hasnah's hut. It would not be far from the river then. The ground seemed hard and the pebbles bit into her bare feet, and she could feel the sweat running down her cheeks. The air was hot and dry like fire in the kitchen stove, and when she walked slowly on, it was as if she were in one of her dreams again when she floated in the boiling water with her hair spread out. (MS, 6)

Heat is often depicted as predatory and rapacious, stalking its long-suffering victims. In 'When the Saints Go Marching' we see this relentless drama unfold:

As his car slipped out from the shade, the sun pounced, scattering spurts of tiny lights on the dark surface of the bonnet. In anticipation he had already screwed up his eyes. Holding the wheel with one hand, he dragged out his handkerchief and quickly wiped the back of his head. The sweat trickled down his neck. (DC, 107)

Kung Ming, on his way back to an unhappy household has first to encounter the draining heat before he confronts the draining relationship with his mad wife. As he approaches the entrance of his house he pauses for a moment to contemplate the effects of the heat on him, and his perpetual struggle with it:

He turned off the engine, and feeling the exhaustion and heat suddenly coming over him, rested his forehead on the back of his arm, smelling the heavy odour of his armpits. When he opened his eyes, he saw how dark and coarse his head had become, the skin on the back was covered with tiny white flakes where he had scratched himself, short straight hairs emerged from beds of pores, and on dark purple vein swelled on his loose skin. (DC, 108)
The energy-sapping heat is indicated by the 'sweat' while 'the odour of his armpits' suggests his exhaustion. And as he closes the gate before entering the house the heat reaches a blazing crescendo: 'The sun boiled on the back of his neck.' (DC, 108)

Two instances in The Mutes in the Sun illustrate this merciless quality of the sun, and the futile efforts of mere humans to withstand it. The day, when Met, the protagonist, is to learn that Gaik Lang, the girl friend/lover of his best friend Kee Huat, is to come to his house to stay, starts out unhappily for him as he is being 'dragged' out of bed before sunrise by his father to go for a morning walk:

They walked quickly up the river. His father swished the long cane in the air as if slicing up pieces of cucumbers. They reached the path by the side of the river. Taking a sharp turn, his father swung eastwards towards the sun. (MS, 72)

The morning sun reveals the objects of his father's attention:

At one point his father stopped and pointed out two women. He peered in their direction squinting his eyes into the sun. (MS, 73)

They return 'shortly before seven', (MS, 73) one hour after sunrise. Met catches a cold and stays in bed. His father comes to see him when he hears of his ailment, but really to ask about Gaik Lang and Kee Huat. The confrontation between father and son is woven with images of the father whose strength is reinforced by the sun:

His father's round face, brown and roughened by the sun and wind, looked strong and calm like a Balinese wood carving. His father muttered under the breath, loud enough however for him to hear, 'weakling, weakling'. (MS, 74)

The atmosphere of the room turns hostile because of the heat:

The weather had grown warm, toasting up as it were, and his servant had come into the room and opened the windows and with each movement the sun blazed forth like a torchlight in the darkened room. (MS, 76)
Also:

perhaps it was the effect of the blazing sun. He was not sure. He had not seen his father so cunning and so gentle at the same time. (MS, 76)

and the abject boy turns 'away from the sun' (MS, 77) because in his mesmerized state he has not learnt till after his father has gone that 'Gaik Lang would be coming to stay with them' (MS, 78). His reaction to the whole situation occurs while:

The sun blazed, branding bars of light on the floor. He felt cold inside. (MS, 78)

The other episode serves to show the sun as emphasizing the ill-intent and confusion which leads to murder. Once again the heat that overpowers Met is a source of intense annoyance and disorientation. After a desperate search for his best friend Kee Huat, Met's last resort is Gaik Lang's prostitute mother. The oppressive heat matches Met's intense search for his friend:

It was the most unlikely hour to call on anyone. The three o'clock sun turning the sky into a fiery glassy emptiness silver-plated the streets and houses. His shirt stuck to his body and the sweat cooked his armpits and crotch. His face was damp and the short hairs at the back of his head stuck together when he found the sun unbearable, he screwed up his eyes. (MS, 95)

After a 'long sizzling walk' (MS, 95) he comes to a street which is narrow and 'swathed in dust' (MS, 95):

He took shelter from the sun under the shade of a ciku tree, feeling the fumes of heat rising on all sides....No one was about at that time. It seemed as if the sun was burning from the interior of the earth. All living things except him, had fled. (MS, 95)

Just as the passage suggests that only a mad person will be out at such a time of day, Met's mood suggests that with each failure to find Kee Huat he becomes increasingly confused and irrational. Gaik Lang's mother's house:

was like any other house in the street. The tiled roof was chewed by many suns into a dark, uneven mash. The
plank walls peeled like flakes of sunburnt skin. Tiny iron bars at the windows were painted in maroon; the two slim pillars supporting the front porch were stripped of paint, leaving dry brown wood exposed to the sun. (MS, 95)

The imagery of the sun as a corroding force is well represented here from the atmosphere to the street, to the houses and then to Gaik Lang's mother. Met's first sight of her is influenced by the sun:

When the door opened a smiling face of a woman in her forties appeared, floating as it were in the frame of sunlight which came through a small high window....And she did not look like a prostitute. It made him feel easier. (MS, 90-97)

In their exchanges of words and looks, once more the description of the body's response to heat is the focus:

The room was unbearably hot. His throat became dry with a queer roughness in the larynx. He found it difficult to swallow his saliva. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the frosted sweat on his forehead. (MS, 97-98)

When the woman realises that his intention is not to engage her service, but to ask about Kee Huat, her annoyance is clothed in the language of heat:

Her face was distorted. Her eyes burned in their mascara pools. (MS, 98)

and when she seeks to initiate him in the art of sex:

Her eyes had a tensed concentrated and vengeful light in them. (MS, 99)

All these circumstances have left Met totally bewildered and in this befuddled state of mind he returns and encounters Gaik Lang who (now to be his father's wife) in her turn takes on the imagery of light and heat:
She gleamed in the sun like a dragonfly... Her eyes had that enormous glitter and they seemed to challenge him... when she raised her face, she closed her eyes against the sun. Her face was dream like. But she quickly snapped her eyes open and the irises seemed to darken each pair, glittering and enormous. (MS, 100-101)

This proves too much for him. In the build-up to the inevitable tragic end, his confusion, the heat and Gaik Lang's challenge all add weight to the killing. It is the hour of 'evil'. The servants feel it and pause in their work:

The sun was burning at its hottest, flaring up quite unexpectedly. He was continually taking out his handkerchief. He felt like going to sleep in the hot sun. How his back ached and throbbed. (MS, 102)

When he finally stabs Gaik Lang:

The sun grew black in the sky. His secret flame roared upwards, consuming. Everything closed on him. (MS, 104)

Thus the oppressive heat is also a metaphor for a social system where young people are at the mercy of potentially corrupt parents who can destroy their lives.

The heat is a harrowing curse in 'Death is a Ceremony' as the dying grandmother, the matriarch of the family, complains: 'It's so hot. I am burning.' (DC, 13) Once again, the all pervading heat is a metaphor of the all powerful grandmother who, even in her death bed controls the family's activities. One of the dearest wishes of the Chinese is to have an easy and peaceful death. Thus to be suffering and uncomfortable in the final hours is indeed a curse. The story then revolves around the people in the household who try to make the grandmother's last hours pleasant by catering to her every wish, and mitigating her discomfort. The maid is urged to fan her in an appropriate way, the daughter wants to wet her head with a wet cloth while grandmother's sister tells her stories to get her mind off her condition. The grandchildren are asked to be good and quiet (but fail and are punished). In this household of activity everybody is hot. None more so than the uncle who is 'bare to
the waist' looking 'oily and round, like a human roast pig'. (DC, 8) When death finally comes, grandmother is cremated, when the fire erases the body from this earth.

The protagonist of 'The Return' takes a trip around town and observes the land he has come back to. Among many other things he notices the heat and its effect on the people. Even in the night, at the eating stalls, he sees that 'soon faces became lacquered with layers of sweat. Handkerchiefs were in constant use.' (MS, 132) One day while travelling inland on a 'hot burning afternoon' he catches a conversation between a woman and her daughter about the heat and their opinion of it:

'Look at them, there soldiers, playing football in the hot sun! How foolish!' (MS, 133)

These 'soldiers' belong to the army camp which is filled with foreign soldiers, namely the British and Australian soldiers, whose attitude to the sun is akin to worship. This is a throw-away commentary on the differences in perspective between the Asians and Europeans about the sun and heat.

This oppressive heat is a metaphor of the human condition and the helplessness of people in the face of over-powering nature. It is also has wider implications of social and political power which suppress and oppress, often without reason or mercy. The victims of heat are the oppressed and the abused. Just as their plight is revealed in the previous chapter 'Like a Wounded Animal', their difficulties are once again highlighted through the medium of a body function -- sweating.

Fear, fear of failure, anxiety and nervousness are all reasons for sweat as the body swings into the mode of self-preservation. In 'It's all in a Dream', the protagonist stands on a platform to give a political speech, in the comparative cool of the night. A crowd silently listens on but:

Despite the breeze, sweat trickled down the sides of his face so that he had to pause several times to wipe his face with his handkerchief. (DC, 75)
There is great anxiety at this moment because although what he is saying is something he believes in:

All he wanted was a good life for everyone and better wages. He wanted to lift everyone up, not to pull everything down. (DC, 76)

He still fears the authorities because they can be unreasonably suspicious of a crowd. In Malaysia where there are many sensitive issues which one may not speak on or write about and where there is a Constitution Act which has the power to send a person to jail indefinitely without a trial, one cannot stand to talk to a crowd without feelings of anxiety. Sure enough, the speaker is picked up, detained and exiled later. Others in his party are like him:

Among them, Ah Chong was the greatest rabble-rouser and he sweated a lot after a speech. (DC, 89)

For he too is an anxious man because he is a crowd stirrer.

Anxiety and fear of failure also attend Dr Bin in 'Not so Long Ago but Still Around'. He is a successful doctor who has been admitted into and accepted as a committee member of the club of the colonial masters, which suggests his social status as well as his acceptability to the British. At the beginning of the story a trivial issue of changing a section of the club's name from the Annex to The Porpoise has become a matter of principle and a battle of wills between the younger set and the older influential colonists. Dr Bin has been asked to cast his vote too:

They were watching him. Dr Bin felt a tenseness gathering in the small of his back....The upper molar in his mouth began to throb, and he felt tiny prickles of sweat under his armpits. The room became warm. He opened his mouth, but could not say anything at first with an effort, he found himself saying, 'It's such an old and established club, sir, and I'm pretty new here. If you'll excuse me, I prefer to abstain.' (DC, 177)

He has betrayed fair play for expediency, and the rest of the story illustrates this leading to the rather unpleasant conclusion where he realizes that he has been little but
a convenience for his British friends. He sweats because he has tried to live in two worlds -- that of his own and that of the British -- and is not successful in either.

Lee Kok Liang keeps drawing attention to 'sweat in the armpits'. These are places which sweat the most, and heavy sweating there is a great discomfort. This is the sign of a person's inability to cope which is a further sign of the characters' anxiety and their surrender to the powers of oppression.

Just as profound sweating is an indication of disorder, so is an excessive attention to female 'breasts and buttocks' a suggestion of an incapacity for self control. Lee uses another aspect of body function -- the response to sexual stimulus, in this case the male's undue preoccupation with and scrutiny of the female body -- as a criticism of males who, in their position of power, become oppressors of the weak.

Kung Ming in 'When the Saints Go Marching' illustrates this pattern. There seems to be a sexual tension in all his conversation and interaction with women. He notices women in sexual terms:

The tips of his fingers tingled as though he was having his first cigarette of the day [when he noticed his housemaid's] young breasts, small, curving softly and growing every moment. He glanced away sharply. (DC, 110)

And he fantasizes about her in a confused manner:

If she were a flower, he would nurse and wait till she bloomed, and if she could have been his daughter how proud he would have been. But whenever he thought of speaking to her....a sense of guilt invaded his feelings. (DC, 111)

Lee uses several anniversaries of independence day to draw readers' attention to Kung Ming's sensuality and to his eventual violation of his sister-in-law. On one such
day, as he takes his sick wife home after a visit to the doctor, he notices a group of young men and women come into their carriage still boisterous after celebrating Independence Day:

...he [became] strangely excited...especially [watching] the appearance of those young girls in their short skirts....

When he went out to get his sick wife water, he had to squeeze through a crowd of young girls and as his thighs brushed against their hips, his nose caught their hot young smells and the blood rose suddenly in him making him weak. (DC, 114-115)

Even on such a serious errand, he cannot help but notice and be aroused by the young girls. It is no wonder that his wife's reaction to his impulses is hatred of young girls and their young bodies and his feeling that their married life is strained. On a visit to his office one day, she vents her feeling against the objects of his lust:

[She] ran to one of the girls and slapped her on the cheek....screaming, pinched her breasts 'Indecent! Indecent!' (DC, 121)

His sister-in-law, Siew Choo, comes to stay with her sister waiting for her wedding day to arrive, in two month's time. She is a sensitive person who is enchanted by the 'beauty of the hill'. She is also a good conversationalist and greedy for knowledge about the outside world. Her brother-in-law, Kung Ming, becomes fascinated by her:

....quiet manners....[and she was] surprisingly gentle. His wife had a certain streak of hardness and malevolence slumbering under a parchment of restraint. The girl reminded him of the soft breast of a yellow bird. (DC,123)

She becomes the object of his desire. On another independence day, after a few drinks 'with his business associates at the bar, exchanging innuendoes with the waitress', (DC, 124) he comes home and finds Siew Choo under the Frangipani tree,
face lifted to the sky watching the fireworks. He rapes her, blaming it on the drinks he has had and his excitement with the girls at work and in the city:

He caught hold of her, giddiness sweeping into his head as he kissed her. She gave out a cry. The fireworks opened out an umbrella of light in the sky, spattering the darkness with dots of iridescence, and as she managed to push him away, they saw the figure of his wife facing them under the porch. The girl broke away and ran into the house past his wife. (DC, 124-125)

The magnificent beauty of the fireworks is contrasted with the ugly violence of rape, the explosion of colours with the shattering of innocence. The country may have achieved independence, but its women have not. The shame torments her and she hangs herself from 'the stumpy crooked branch of the raintree' (DC, 125) on the hill whose beauty she has admired.

Her suicide, his wife's madness and his feeling of guilt and contrition are not enough to make him curb his urges. In a highly comic and pathetic sexual scene, he grapples with his mad wife and takes hold of the maid in the struggle:

Another struggle as his wife tried to get up. The buttocks of the girl [maid] heaved and crushed against his belly. A tremor pricked his loins....His wife swallowed the pills as though she was retching. The girl was now crying The confusion he stroked the curve of her buttocks, trembling and feeling weak. For a long time the three of them remained locked together. With a shock he realized that he was kissing the bright pink mole below the girl's ear licking it with the tip of his tongue. His nose was inhaling her lemony smell as though he were a dog. He was rubbing himself on her. And then a wave of giddiness swept over him (DC,127-128)

Lee's criticism here is severe, likening Kung Ming to a 'dog' and reducing him to nothing more than an animal 'smelling' and 'rubbing' in the basest manner, without self-respect or dignity.
Sometimes the protagonist struggles with a double standard, gloating over a 'willing' female yet despising her. This is an even worse attitude towards women and Lee censures this in the tale of Dr Bin in 'Not so Long Ago but Still Around'. He is friendly with Loretta Leng and admires her physical attractions. She is the girl 'with the wobbles [who] wears tight skirts which reach to her knees'. Yet he despises her for being a Hailan (the dialectal group who specializes in working as waiters, houseboys and cooks, suggestive of servitude and connivance), and her reputation of having 'slept with a soccer team'. So when he hears that she is pregnant his concern is only half-hearted and insincere since his concern is more for George, his friend, the supposed father of the child, than for Loretta who has gone to him for help. This is an example of the double standard that men engage in because of the power they hold.

In his drawer in his bedroom Dr. Bin pulls out a number of magazines bought at a 'high price under the counter':

and opened up their pages, studying minutely the glossy colours which tinted the bodies of nude Scandinavian girls. (DC, 185)

This is yet another indication of his double standard. In public he is a respectable doctor, in private he is a lecher who engages in illegal activities suggested by the magazines being bought 'under the counter'. Even his conversation has a sexual twist. In the company of an Englishman who is complaining that the locals do not know how to tap the rubber trees efficiently but are slaughtering the trees, he replies with enthusiasm: 'Ah, just like raping a woman.' (DC, 191) He finds favour in the eye of the Englishman because he (the English man) 'liked nice things said in the crudest possible manner.' (DC, 191)

Lee is making a point that men like Kung Ming and Dr. Bin belong to a highly unjust social system which discriminates against women and oppresses them. Power is maintained through sexual repression and both men and women are victims of this.
The wider implication of the stories is that Lee's characters belong to a society where those in authority impose their will on weaker members. Lee is pointing to the absurdity, hypocrisy and gross injustice which arise from such oppressive authority and the helplessness and the tragedy of the oppressed.
Chapter Six

Flowers in the Sky - a case study

Flowers in the Sky (1981), a full length novel, was written thirty two years after Lee's first story, 'Five Fingers' appeared in the Melbourne University Arts Association journal 'Present Opinion' (1949). In the intervening years Lee had been called to the Bar, joined and left some political groups, for example the Socialist Front, had become a frustrated nationalist in a young nation still trying to find its collective identity and had written many short stories which lay bare his ideas about Malaysians, especially migrant Malaysians.

In the previous chapters I have illustrated how Lee has used the alienated person in the figure of the misfit as the medium to express his thoughts about the migrant Chinese who, though a Malaysian citizen, does not feel truly Malaysian because of government policies that discriminate against non-Malays, and discourage discussion on issues that are considered detrimental to the national interest. Thus the world of Lee's short stories is heavily populated by Chinese people who are oppressed and suppressed

The world of his only novel, Flowers in the Sky, is not only populated by the Chinese by also by the Indians, the other major migrant group in Malaysia, and the Malays. In this novel Lee exhibits his maturity and his craftsmanship as he establishes a backdrop of local sensuous stimuli (heat, assorted flowers, food, smells and passtimes). Thus the novel attempts to be a more representative Malaysian one.

The core of the story concerns the two main characters' attempts to define self, thus continuing the major themes of Lee's short stories, the disposition of the alienated
person, attitudes and responses to religion, the sufferings of the mutilated or abused
with a strong focus on physical sensations. As the two main characters, a Ceylonese
Tamil doctor and a Chinese Buddhist monk are migrants to Malaysia, they represent,
on the one hand, the concerns of the major non-Malay portions of society, the Indians
and the Chinese, and on the other, the tensions of a multicultural community. Also, the
representativeness of both the monk and the doctor is offset by the fact that neither is
typical of the worker immigrant class, both are separated from the 'superstitious'
religiosity of Tamil Hindus and the Chinese peasant farmers and merchants.

Before Flowers in the Sky Lee's stories feature mainly the Chinese, especially the
Straits Chinese. The Indians appear as minor characters in the stories -- 'Ibrahim
Something' and The Mutes in the Sun -- while the Malays are depicted in two stories -
- 'Just a Girl' and 'Ronggeng Ronggeng', -- and as minor characters exerting authority
in 'Ibrahim Something', 'It's All in a Dream' and 'Dumb, Dumb, By a Bee Stung'. In
Flowers in the Sky the major racial groups of Malaysia are given attention although
unequally. The Malay, Indian and Chinese minor characters provide a rich and
valuable insight into the various aspects of Malaysian life.

The chance encounter between the Indian surgeon, Mr. K. and Venerable Hung,
when he repairs the monk's hernia, forms the dramatic centre of the story. Their lives,
told in flashback, chronicle their struggle as they experience living as migrants in
Malaysia, while their subsequent meeting, during Hung's stay in hospital reveals the
difficulties and problems of living in a multicultural society where differences in
language, custom and belief have kept people apart.

Mr. K. and the monk inhabit different worlds; the doctor lives in the world of the
English-educated professional class, and the monk inhabits a world shaped by the
traditional Buddhist belief of China. Throughout the novel they communicate only
through an interpreter. After the operation when Mr. K. wants to 'communicate with
the monk without an interpreter', the monk misreads his sign language. Mr. K. wants
to tell Hung that after his operation he (Hung) 'must walk as quickly as he could,
instead of lying in bed'. But his gestures make the monk laugh, and Mr. K. is satisfied
that Hung has understood his meaning. The monk, in his turn, seeing the gestures of
the doctor, smiles 'to humour him' and understands his message to be that 'in his
condition, unable to move in his bed, he [has] to be careful' and sympathizes as only a
monk can that the good doctor 'must have taken a vow of silence on this day, [and] any utterance would have sent him to perdition'. While the comic situation reveals
Lee's adept skill, the episode carries a more sombre meaning. Lee seems to suggest
dangers not only in the inability to communicate but also in communicating
imperfectly, for therein lie the seeds of misunderstanding and conflict. It is not
surprising that the final scene displays the supreme example of the extent of the two
men's lack of mutual understanding:

And then Mr. K. smiled. He saw that the monk, whom he had discharged that morning, was getting into a
Mercedes, helped by a chauffeur. The monk looked tiny beside the car. What made M. K. smile was that the car's
number plate showed the figure 666. Book of Revelations, Chapter 13. He doubted whether his pastor
would ride in one with that number. But he had seen the monk in that car. Perhaps he should tell the monk
something about it.

What Mr. K. did not know was that 666 sounded like "Joy, Joy Joy" in Cantonese. And the monk was very
proud of the numbers and had used considerable influence upon the Registrar and Inspector of Motor
Vehicles to get them. (FS, 176)

The gulf between them is unbridged and the sad irony is that Mr. K. thinks that the
happy monk has gone home in a prestige car bearing the sign of the Beast, the anti-
Christ.

As he turns back joylessly to wait for his first patient for that day, we realize that
he has not found the answer to the mystery of the 'deep, irregular weals' which were
made by burn marks, on the monk's chest. When he first sees the monk in his
consultation room 'the sorrow in the monk's eyes puts a stop to Mr. K.'s intention of questioning him about these marks'. (FS, 7) And when he operates on the monk, he has the 'ugly scars...carefully concealed by a tight sheet...[because] he has promised [the monk] that no one would see those scars.' (FS, 8) Thus, although he has healed the monk physically and has shown an interest in him, he has made no attempt to seek the reason for the marks nor does he come any closer to the truth about him than when he first sees him. Their differences remain, and their meeting has been but a fleeting, muted attempt at communication, both men remaining locked in their individual worlds.

Yet they are alike in many ways. Both are migrants who have spent their childhood in another country, the doctor in Ceylon and the monk in China. Both are successful men in their profession, one the reputable surgeon of the Marvellous Cure Centre and the other, the priest of a 'well known temple in the city'. Both are healers, one of the body and the other, of the spirit. Both have a practical and domineering woman behind their success -- Mr. K., his rich and materialistic wife; Hung, his pragmatic sister. Both search for self-definition in an adopted land. Both have transgressed their individual sets of values and beliefs and are suffering the consequences. This 'suffering' sets the tone of the novel.

Flowers in the Sky opens with two passages from the Surangama Sutra 3 which relate to transgression. In the first, a Buddhist nun is cast down to hell for fornication, and in the second a Buddhist disciple succumbs to the seduction of a Matangi (a low caste woman). Taken as metaphors, the first relates to Mr.K. who has turned away from his prescribed beliefs to embrace the sensual pleasures and is cast down into the hell of an empty life, while the second points to Hung who has succumbed to the temptation of the flesh and is consequently corrupted. Thus, each establishes his identity in the novel through his response to sex and religion.
Lee employs the character of the doctor to explore the conflict between traditional values and modern materialism, between prescribed belief and Western education. We first see Mr. K. as a very successful and very materialistic man. He is the English-educated surgeon of the Marvellous Cure Centre, where he makes a lot more money than when he was working for the government. His wealth is visibly exhibited by his 'Sam belt', 'gold Rolex' watch, 'Revox recorder', his chauffeur-driven 'new Mercedes' and his mansion with a magnificent garden by the sea. He is a Christian but rarely goes to church and his only connection with the church is his generous donation when the pastor, a fellow Sri Lankan, comes to visit. Sadly, this is his reaction to his uncle and his behaviour during the days of his youth when he was still in Ceylon when his uncle took him to church every Sunday. His first visit there was a particularly confusing and embarrassing experience because:

all the singing upset his stomach. His uncle was hiccupping all the time and farted out loudly. He was so ashamed that he hung his head when the pastor spoke to him after the service. (FS, 27)

Also:

the old man [his uncle] went to church but kept the idols of Buddha, Krishna, Ganesh and Kali in the hut, and whenever the pastor came to visit them, the old man would hurriedly hide these idols in the store room. (FS, 31)

Now he does not 'believe in anything anymore', and ironically he believes that has 'made his life so much simpler'. (FS, 31)

It is during his wife's skirmish with Indian Hindu devotees in his prized garden, over a Ganesh statue washed up on the shore, that he realizes that his life is empty and has been so for a long time. He had married his wife for her 'large breasts' and her 'very commodious dowry'. Now he resents her because he can neither satisfy her sexually nor disentangle himself from becoming a 'slave minting coins' to satisfy her interest in money and the 'things money could buy'. She is 'satisfied with [just]
touching the surface of things' while he is 'more intense' and has 'more feeling'. Therefore, the trust in money alone to make his life simpler has failed. His impotency with his wife is ironical because he is a very sensual man. Even as a child of four he was sexually aroused by the touch of his servant girl's breasts as they brushed him when she helped him in his bath. His criterion for a bride was somebody with 'large breasts, the bigger the better'. Even now he cannot look at any female without noticing her breasts and her body. This further underlines the extent of his emptiness at home, for now he and his wife 'could not touch each other anymore'. (FS, 29)

Mr. K. is a Ceylonese Tamil who can not speak Tamil because of his Western education which has led him to the heights of his professional ladder, but severed him from his ties with his history and tradition. He remembers an occasion when he was having sex with a Chinese girl in a hotel:

....when his thing came he shouted out the few earthy Tamil words he knew and when it was over, he remembered feeling very sad, very sad at not knowing the language well. In extreme moments of sex, one reverts to one's mother tongue. (FS, 8-9)

Thus, he searches for the ties of his ancestry from which he hopes to derive the meaning of his existence. In his childhood, his uncle's harbouring of the gods is an indication of not wanting to sever those ties -- the ties of Hindu and Buddhist tradition which have shaped him. Christianity and a Western education have robbed Mr. K. of his heritage, and he is a misfit in a multicultural society. The brilliance of his skill and his money cannot brighten the dark fact that he has lost his roots. In him, Lee fully explores the confusion and subsequent emptiness of a lost man desperately trying to find himself.

On the other hand, Venerable Hung, the Buddhist monk, is still closely tied to his traditional values and beliefs. Yet he is no less a misfit than Mr. K. Through his character Lee explores the tensions between the community and the individual,
between the spiritual and the physical. Hung's vocation has been forced on him by a society which insists on filial piety. As the monk's life is not a choice he himself has made, he finds it very difficult to subjugate his natural sensual feelings. Thus for Hung, attaining Buddhist spirituality is acutely difficult as he has to fight his physical desires all the time. Once again Lee seems to suggest that extremes of any sort are counter-productive, while moderation is the most sensible way. The strict hierarchy of the traditional Chinese community, where the elders hold sway over the younger and where expectations of duty run high, claims Hung as an obedient member.

He is sent to the monastery as a boy of ten in order to save his idiot brother, for, according to his father, Hung is born to pay the debt for the sake of his brother. From then onwards his life is one dedicated to the negation of self-will and desire, according to the Buddhist precepts for monks. His training in the monastery is arduous, but one day his master sadly comments, 'You cling too much' when he sees Hung gently fondling a carp in the pool. (The carp is a recurrent image of Hung's temptation and submission to sensuous and sensual pleasures):

[And] when he heard this, he tried harder to lose his mind, to swim away from the sea of 'samsara', to search for quieter shores. (FS, 22)

So at twenty five years old he once again surrenders to the will of his elder, this time to the abbot, to uproot himself from his 'vast homeland' to travel to the 'south seas' in order to preach Buddhism. With him, comes his sister, who, unlike her brother, rebels against a forced marriage to a rich man, suggesting an individualism and a worldly-wisdom which Hung does not have.

In the 'south seas' his struggles to attain spiritual perfection increase greatly. In a first letter to his abbot he lists his woes and his unflatteringly negative opinion of the Chinese in Malaysia. Above all he feels as if he does not belong and is an ineffectual
teacher. So he has had to change and adapt to a different school of Buddhism for them:

'...great were the temptations I had to undergo and fight against. It is strange, this new Buddhaland where I am now. The sky burns with the fierceness of ten million joss-sticks....and because of the strangeness of some of the tongues, your humble one feels that he is alone, a voice that has no tongue, a tongue that has no voice. The people who come here to pray are rough and simple and understand little. They see the illusion of Buddha and talk about fortunes and misfortunes and supplicate for riches...Really this is the place where the Pureland will thrive and so I have adapted to the needs of the people....they could not read Chinese and those who could, have [an] ill command of the language....Such are the people of the Han stock who have settled in this country, some of whom....had forefathers here as long as three generations ago....There is so much to do....' (FS, 34-35)

Pureland Buddhism is a less demanding variation and is more accessible to his ignorant and rough devotees, as its idea of Nirvana is the attainment of a sensuous paradise.

Hung himself practises a different sect of Buddhism, the Ch'an school (popularly known as Zen), which emphasizes meditation. But in this new land his meditation is constantly interrupted by sensuous awareness. The heat is a very bothering factor and undermines his resolve. Lee is emphasizing here the existence and the demands of the body. As the chapter 'Blistering with Sweat' illustrates, heat is a disturbing rather than a positive element. With Hung, heat is not just a source of physical disturbance but also the metaphor for his sexual desires. In the intense heat the demands of Hung's body are even more difficult to deny:

What he was not warned against was the heat of this country....He discarded his thick dress and wore light cotton. Despite this he found himself sweating as he had never sweated in his life....corroding him, reminding him ....of his tongue, eyes, fingers, ankles, urine, faeces, nose, mouth and ears and his private parts and of the impermanence and corruption of the body....He went to his bunk to meditate on the foulness and impurity of the swollen corpse....The more he went through such
exercises, the more he became conscious of his own body....(FS, 37-38)

Even the meditation on the decomposing corpse, designed to halt a person's attachment to the sensual, does not help, for the more Hung fights against it, the more he becomes aware of his body and its sensual responses.

His concentration is also constantly disturbed by the call of Muslims to prayer:

It was towards the evening, in the hour of the cockerel....as he was preparing himself for meditation that he heard the sound....the sound thudded in; it came rapidly, in a series of threes and then a pause, followed quickly by a repetition that startled. It was a most peculiar sound....
And then it suddenly stopped and for the first time in his life he heard the trembling cry that rose up in the hot evening air and flared out above the still coconut palms,....above the padi-fields, meandering among the huts and buildings by the river, floating eerily, unusual, high-pitched, nasal and glottal, a cry that became a prayer and entreaty. (FS, 38-39)

This episode clearly shows the clash of different cultures, thus revealing the problems of living in a multicultural society. The voice of the muezzin disturbs Hung's attempt to meditate. The Buddhist need for silence is contrasted with the blare of the Muslim muezzin. During Hung's period of meditation the loud voice of the muezzin becomes the metaphor for the sensuous passions that assault Hung in his intense struggle for spirituality.

There is yet another obstacle to his successful meditation. We learn of his constant distraction by and pleasure in the nubile fluidity of the white carp in his master's pool in the monastery. This is the most distressing of all because it represents his own humanness and therefore his inability to erase the sensual from his consciousness. In this struggle, Lee portrays Hung with understanding and compassion, for the negation of self and desires has been, from the onset, not a choice but an obligation, when he has had to subject his individualism to the will of the community. Readers share Mr.
K.'s puzzlement at the burns on Hung's chest when he comes for his hernia operation and at his insistent request that 'no nurse would touch him' and that only 'male hospital assistants' are to take care of him. As the story unfolds we discover his excruciating struggle to curb his awareness of Ah Lan, a mute disciple of the temple, as a sexual being. He remembers with deep agitation the incident when he began to notice her. Her arms were 'soft and plump and strong' and as he pulled her away from damaging the god of war statue:

her arms wriggled in his hands, soft and silky. They shone with the tender radiance of a white carp. (FS, 129)

This fleeting physical contact with Ah Lan is enough to prove correct the Buddhist idea that women are detrimental to a man's salvation for they are objects of distraction and desire. From that night onwards:

his mind kept slipping....during his sitting. Always to the white carp and to the bare hands. It was as though he had become stained with a little spruce of desire. To possess. His nights became restless after that. (FS, 130)

Thus the heat of sexual desire, the incessant voice of passion depicted by the muezzin, and Ah Lan, the object of his desire, all prevent him from gaining enlightenment.

Once, in the long years of meditation, he does come close to some sort of divine revelation, but then he is not sure, and is never to be sure, that the Goddess of Mercy is not standing there with Ah Lan. In a surreal account, Hung's brief moment of apparent enlightenment melts into his growing sexual urges and he struggles to rid himself of the confusion between the two. Thus all the sensuous and sensual stimuli that he strives to deny come together to seduce him and to make him weak. Lee's treatment of the monk's struggle is immensely sympathetic, revealing Lee's deep knowledge and understanding of Buddhism:

[He] experienced a great heat in the pit of his stomach, burning like a cauldron....And then dimly, through many layers, the call of the muezzin wafted down, muted but
still distracting. He tried to resist it. The heat burnt fiercely in his cauldron....The figures had merged and somehow or other Ah Lan was standing at the doorway, looking at him....He willed her to go away. He was on the point of succeeding when the call of the muezzin pierced his consciousness and he felt the great heat inside him....And he forgot what he was sitting for. He forgot. He remembered the white carp....He remembered the great darkness when the doorway to his room dimmed with a shadow that closed upon his mind. Trembling, he lay down on the platform, his bed and waited. (FS, 165)

We are not sure what he is waiting for -- perhaps for Ah Lan, perhaps for a clearer revelation or perhaps for his desire to cool. Lee leaves that to our deduction and imagination. In the very next paragraph the monk seeks to quell his flesh by self-immolation:

On the following night, after his meditation on his sweating chest he drew a circle with his writing brush. He lay himself down and waxed the circle as carefully as he could. Then he placed a small piece of charcoal on to the top of it. He struck a match and lit that little cone of charcoal sitting on his chest, and watched it burn. He repeated the verses of the Heart Sutra, trying to banish the great pain from his mind. And every time the shadow entered his mind, he lit yet another circle. (FS, 166)

Even this self-immolation is an enigmatic action for, many, many years ago when he underwent the initiation ceremony of burning holes on his skull, he had employed the image of the white carp to offset the 'deadly pain' that he felt:

Suddenly he thought of the huge white carp and the cool water of the pool....Whenever the pain came he thought of the carp and with it fought the wave of nausea that was threatening to overwhelm him. (FS, 161)

It would seem that thinking of the carp evoked a certain sensual pleasure that would counteract his physical pain. As the pain was 'insistent and deadly' the balancing sensual pleasure would have to be almost as intense as orgasm. Therefore the self-inflicted pain may actually be a means of evoking the sensual image of the white carp.
Hung also stops Ah Lan's expression of her feelings in drawing. Soon after the incident with Ah Lan he chances upon her drawings. They are of fishes and one is particularly disturbing to him:

...two carps, one very large....and inside the first one, a much smaller carp, trying to get out through the mouth of the large one. (FS, 138)

The sexual connotation of the image proves to be the last straw. His sister sees in him:

an expression she had not seen for a long time....the expression carried with it as well a sort of sadness and resignation. (FS, 137-138)

But Hung has failed. Even though he has not actually indulged in sexual activities, his surrender to the temptation is a sign of failure. His search for the spiritual, which is imposed upon him, has led him to a life of denial. In almost every way his struggle has always been a painful one. After so many years, his struggle, at best has given him an unrealistic view of the world and at worse, has frustrated him because he has failed to achieve spiritual peace.

The powerful irony at the end of the book is that his success is measured in his getting a bigger and richer temple, interestingly through his sister's sharp pragmatic dealings with the local businessmen:

In a way, Venerable Hung thought he had succeeded. He had made the temple famous....even though the devotees had remained as ignorant as ever....And in the course he had sent thousands of dollars back to the old temple in the old country....(FS, 174-175)

And he leaves the hospital in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, the sign of wealth and prestige, with a number plate which he has bribed the Registrar and Inspector of Motor Vehicles for, but which, in another culture can signify the mark of the beast, the sign of ultimate corruption and evil. His adherence to traditional values and obligations has left him a man corrupted by the mercenary ways of the world. Like the disciple in the
second passage at the opening of the book, he is tainted by his yielding to the seduction, not so much of sexual pleasures but of the allure of the 'south seas', the gathering of wealth.

The title of the book 'Flowers in the Sky' relates to a Buddhist story in which a fairy scatters flowers on the Buddha's disciples during a sermon. The sky is full of flowers and the air filled with fragrance. Soon they fall to the ground but some are stuck on one disciple, Sariputra, and could not even be shaken off. The fairy says that the flowers do not fall off his person because his deep-rooted attachments are not yet eliminated. Those who have freed themselves from worldly behaviour would have no flowers stuck on them. Sariputra then realizes that he is still far from having grasped the Divine Way. Therefore the phrase is a metaphor for a state of peace which is a mirror of Nirvana. The idea that if the flowers are in the sky one can experience a state of peace but not if they are attached to one's person, because the flowers represent the beautiful delicate world of material things which people cannot let go. Ironically, the only time that Hung experiences this state is at the beginning of the book when he is under anaesthetic.

The juxtaposing of the two Buddhist quotations at the beginning of the novel relating to punishment and the experience of this blissful state is significant. Lee seems to suggest that in the real world a person cannot attain the ideal of any religion and expectations of attaining it are an imposition which can only lead to pain and alienation. Moreover, the ideals of a particular religion undergo change in a changed or changing environment, as with the Buddhism which Hung transports to the 'south seas'. It is often corrupted as it is caught up in the tide of migrant mentality and aspirations, particularly the drive towards success and wealth. Therefore Hung's temple features a more prominent god of war which the local businessmen insist on installing, in order to maintain their donations. Religion succumbs to materialism, the old gives way to the new and spiritual aspiration surrenders to worldly pragmatism.
Besides these two characters - Mr. K. and Hung - who embody the two extremes of belief, one the material and the other the spiritual, Lee also portrays other characters who believe in other religions and cherish different aspirations. One example is Gopal, the inspector who is asked to manage and then disperse the crowd who have gathered at Mr. K.'s garden in order to worship an idol of Ganesha which has been washed up on the rock in Mr. K.'s house. He is the antithesis of Hung. Hung's Buddhism stresses the suppression and control of the sensual appetites while Gopal's Hinduism emphasizes the fusion of sexual and transcendental desires. And like Hung's Buddhism, Hinduism has undergone change in an adopted land.

Gopal belongs to the erotic Tantric sect and his aim is to find his guru and his shakti. In public Gopal seems a harmless nonentity but in private:

He worshipped all the gods of India and spent hours collecting and hunting for idols....He was a bachelor [who]....on festival days....retired alone to his room and lit the oil lamps and stripped himself to the waist and practised yogic postures, trying to raise the serpent in his anus.4....He had to find his Shakti to share with him the discovery and joy of Krishna and Radha.5 (FS, 53-54)

As a member of the Tantric sect Gopal is also portrayed as a misfit for his religion is not a mainstream Hinduism. The Tantric sect emphasizes sexual activity as the way to discover the atman, the god in the person and then be at peace. Once, when he chanced upon a couple in copulation during a police raid, Gopal had been unduly excited and aroused:

The women was astride the man, immobile. Inspector Gopal was sure that his 'lingam' had gone into her 'Yoni'. He had never seen such an expression on a woman's face such utter surrender....Gopal was disappointed to find that she was not a prostitute....[he] wished she had been one, because she could have been his Shakti. (FS, 54)
Unlike both Mr K. and Hung who fail to find what they are searching for, Gopal succeeds in finding his guru in Swami Gomez, a Hindu priest in charge of a small temple, who is a rather cunning manipulator. He also finds his Radha -- Mr K.'s servant girl Nila -- in whose expression 'Gopal [catches] a glimpse of what he [has] long been searching for'. (FS, 61)

In the ensuing battle of wills between Mrs K., who is worried about her beautiful garden paved with 'imported Australian short grass' and is adamant that the 'hooligans' and 'dirty people' should be removed, and the Hindu devotees, who just want the statue of Ganesh to remain in the garden for twenty four hours, Gopal is offered an honoured and blessed drink of holy nectar (honey alcohol) and incense (sprinkled liberally with marijuana.) He becomes slightly drunk and sees the proceedings in a different perspective:

....he found himself crushed in by the crowd holding onto Nila, murmuring 'Shakti'. He had to push through the crowd with Nila to stop it from developing into a riot. (FS, 87)

He is pleased with Ganesh for he believes that the god has led him to his Shakti and he will be 'bound and be entombed in her forever and ever'. (FS, 86)

When the crowd becomes impossible and Mrs. K. utterly vexed, the riot squad is called in. Gopal finds himself confronting a dilemma. He decides to renounce his profession and join the devotees:

Nila was crying. Inspector Gopal put his arm round the girl and she tried to move away but the crowd pressed them together. In that moment, feeling the softness of the girl, seeing the darkness in her eyes, Inspector Gopal made his decision. He would help Ganesh, Lord Ganesh. (FS, 91)
The subsequent marriage between Gopal and Nila is the union between the Shakti and Shiva, between the flesh and the mind. As Syd Harrex notes:

....in relation both to the theme of passion and control and to the question of the human worth of religion, Gopal and Nila symbolise a middle way between the extremes of renunciation and materialism, of excoriating asceticism and hedonistic sensuality.  

For Gopal sensuality is positive but for Hung it is negative. Gopal seeks to rationalize and fulfil his sexual appetite throughout his life while Hung seeks to negate it. This episode of Gopal offers comic relief from the sombre portrayal of Mr. K.'s emptiness and Hung's struggle. Thus Gopal's sexual behaviour is treated with lightness and humour by Lee who seems to suggest that the best way is a middle way which is also the most human way.

Gopal's boss Inspector Hashim is a Malay Muslim who is not only 'good with the ladies but [is] also ambitious' (FS, 63). He is also clever, 'beating the Chinese candidates' in the entrance examinations, and handsome too. It has been hinted that with the right connections he could climb up the political ladder fast. With his qualities he would have made an excellent minister. He constantly thanks Allah that he is so successful. His portrayal is a sanitized ideal of the Malay just as Gopal's portrayal is a gross caricature of the Indian. But unlike Gopal, who is shy and has a 'strong reticence about sex and girls', Hashim is a womanizer:

[He] had to have his outings every other day, and more so during the durian season. That fruit added lustre to the desires of the body. (FS, 69)

In the overall ethical framework of the novel Hashim has the least restraint. He is presented as sexually overactive and even more so during the 'durian season' suggesting that he comes from a society which has a liberal view of male sexual activity. Lee comments on the different cultures which see things differently from one
another. Unlike Kung Ming in 'When the Saints Go Marching', who suffers guilt from an overdose of overactive sexuality, Hashim is quite proud of his forays.

In the portrayal of his characters Lee's sympathy clearly lies with the misfits as he explores their plight with compassion and sensitivity. He lightly brushes past those who are happy and untroubled. He has used a leveller to place his characters on the same plane, that is, their humanity and their response to sex and religion. Thus he has achieved the aim of his book which is:

first of all to emphasize the flesh's vulnerability and second to reinforce the idea that those who think and feel too much must also suffer too much. 7

Therefore, in Lee's novel, as in his short stories, the idea of suffering, pain, the alienated and the sad are given significant consideration. Perhaps the only person in the novel who comes nearest to religious enlightenment is Ah Lan, the mute, a figure frequently used by Lee to portray the abused and the silenced who cannot voice their pain. Because of her plight she is naively unaware of the corruption of the world. Her world of silence is marked by her daily work in the temple. She is unaware of the struggle and pain she has caused Hung. At the dawn of Hung's conflict with his sensual stirrings she discovers the world of drawing and expresses her feelings well in sketches of fishes. When Hung sees her drawing he promptly puts a stop to it with what seems like a lame excuse:

this activity was the type of pleasure which the World Honoured One said was pleasure loving. (FS, 138)

Pek Sim, his sister, is annoyed with him because it is so 'unfair'. Ah Lan, has been forbidden to do the only thing that she loves and is capable of doing very well. She is similar to Kee Huat in The Mutes in the Sun and the hunchback in 'Dumb, Dumb, by a Bee Stung'. Each is mutilated in some way by an authority who rules them -- Kee
Huat by Met's father, the hunchback by the adults who reject him and Ah Lan by the monk. Hung is comparable to the mutilators of Lee's short stories. He is the powerful authority figure who mutilates her natural talent for drawing which is her only way of expressing her feelings. Like Kee Huat, who has been mutilated to such an extent that he becomes a mute able to make only gurgling noises, Ah Lan's mutilation reduces her to perpetual menial work, for the loss of her art deadens her desire for learning:

from that day on...[she] did not draw, nor did she practise her writing. Instead she went back to her routine of cleaning the temple, washing the benches, altar and tables. (FS, 139)

The irony of the priest depriving her of her one true gift is overwhelming. Hung, in pursuit of his own egoistic spiritualism fails to accomplish what he has sworn to do according to Buddhism:

to lead all beings, without exception, to salvation, to bring an end to all pain and suffering. (FS, 156)

Another figure of pain is Ah Looi, the dying woman who is suffering from cancer of the bowel. She is 'corroded by the disarray of her cells' and afraid to die (a fear which expresses itself nightly in the form of a horrific nightmare). In her third visit to the hospital in six months she is sinking fast. After her operation Mr. K. looks at her and realizes that he could do nothing much. He thinks ruefully:

If only he could cut out the pain -- not with drugs but with his knife -- he would hunt for it everywhere. (FS, 154)

Hung, the spiritual leader, is also unable to help her as he is a patient in hospital himself. Ironically, Ah Looi finds peace through the help of Ah Lan, the mute, the one who by any standard, should be the least able to help. But Ah Looi dies with a certain calmness:
Half an hour before she died her face slowly took on a rosy hue...her eyes glowed through the curtain of drugs and pain killers....She was barely conscious, but she had looked up at the ceiling. The fear had gone...[Ah Lan] had slipped her jade bracelet onto [Ah Looi's hand]. At this Ah Looi had smiled happily, and fingered the bracelet. (FS,166)

Ah Lan's gift to the dying woman is not so much the jade bracelet, which is her most valued possession, but her gesture of giving her all. She has touched Ah Looi’s forehead and held her. And that momentary sense of care and unconditional love is enough for Ah Looi. She dies without fear, thus granting herself the final good fortune that the Chinese pray for -- the luck to die peacefully.

The statue of Ganesh which has washed ashore on Mr. K.'s property tells a tale of mutilation too. Ganesh is the Hindu god who is mutilated by his father, Shiva, because of his beauty and his place in his mother's esteem. The jealous Shiva looks at the beautiful boy and cuts off his head. When his mother, Pavarti, makes a fuss and laments the mutilation of her son, Shiva promises to put the head back. But he can not find the son's head. So he cuts off the head of the first thing that he sees, which is an elephant's, and joins it to his son's shoulders. Ganesh is the god of learning, of tricks and of compassion. These qualities are, in varying degrees, explored in the novel. The representation of Hinduism in terms of a mutilated god is interesting because, like Buddhism which is changed and adulterated through its passage overseas, it too is distorted. Thus we see the Swami Gomez as a cunning opportunist who lives by his wits and Gopal as a comic figure for light relief.

Once again Lee depicts the corrupting forces of the new land where modernism, commercialism and materialism take over traditional values and beliefs. In his evaluation of traditional religions and their place in the lives of the people, the religions have all failed and through this failure the protagonists become misfits and are left in their individual hells. Only Gopal, through a sexual variant of Hinduism, finds
fulfilment. The book ends with no resolutions to their search for self-definition. Venerable Hung continues on his path to make his temple more famous by 'searching for a successor who would take care of his reputation' and Mr. K. turns back once more to confront his wife's inadequacies and 'pretend [that] everything [is] back to normal.' (MS, 176)

That Lee proposes no solution in his novel does not mean that the book offers no hope for the Malaysian situation. Far from it. Lee, the mature artist by the time of the publication of the novel, has come to terms with the Malaysian scenario. His hope lies very much in the quality of compassion, which is the key to honesty, understanding and harmony among the people.

Compassion is the emotion which is largely missing in the characters of Lee's short stories. The lack of it makes the grandmother of 'Birthday' insensitive to the needs of her granddaughter; drives Ibrahim of 'Ibrahim Something' into the community of the guerrillas in the hills; turns Silly Q of 'Ami To Fu' into a sadist; induces the father of 'Just a Girl' to send her to an institution and forces the father of 'The Pei-Pa' to sell his daughter into prostitution.

In the novel Lee employs the characters of Ah Lan and Dr. K. to illustrate the positive aspects of compassion. While Ah Lan is one of the misfit-victims, compared to others in Lee's fiction, she has unusually redemptive qualities. She gives comfort to Venerable Hung's sister, Pek Sim, and almost single-handedly helps Ah Looi die an easeful and fearless death. In Flowers in the Sky, Lee moves beyond the dimension of revealing the malaise of a multicultural society to suggest hope for it. Thus, Ah Lan is the precursor and complement of Dr. K., who even though he views his life as an increasingly empty one, still prides himself on being honest as a surgeon. This honesty stems from his compassion for his patients:

He never falsified a report or lied to a patient or refused to admit his mistakes (FS, 147)
His compassion for the monk makes him unable to satisfy his own puzzlement over the monk's scars on his chest. He also promises to cover the scars with a special tight sheet so that no one else would see them, even though it is odd and not a customary procedure. His compassion for Ah Looi, the woman dying of cancer, makes him want to 'sit down by her side and confess to her how he [feels] so hopeless in so many things' (FS, 150) thus placing himself on an equal level with her, as he shares her sorrow and pain. He wants to search the world for a knife that would cut out all pain.

By contrast, Venerable Hung is portrayed as lacking in compassion. Ironically the spiritual healer lacks the humanness of the physical healer. Although Hung has joined the monastery to pay the debt of his idiot brother, he has done so reluctantly. That is the reason why he has had so much trouble in 'letting go'. Instead he has 'clung on too much'. His lack of compassion turns him into an oppressor who suppresses Ah Lan's talents in drawing in order to curb his own growing desires for her. It is interesting to note that throughout the novel Hung, the spiritual leader, does not perform an act of spiritual healing. Instead he is in hospital for the whole duration of the novel. And when he is well again he is seen in the emblem of materialism, the Mercedes, driving towards his famous temple with the large statue of the God of War. This is the extent of his corruption.

Thus, if Hung is the metaphor for the corruption of an increasingly materialistic, modern and heartless society then Mr. K., the surgeon who, inspite of his increasing materialism and empty personal life, can cut away diseases to cure his patients, is the metaphor for the alienated protagonists who have the power to effect a cure for their society. Armed with a large dose of compassion they can cut away the inequalities and ills of their country in order to lessen the pain of alienation and perhaps, to lessen the number of misfits. Similarly, if the sick monk embodies traditional belief that has become changed and corrupted by its passage overseas and cannot offer the individual any help in a changing society, then Mr. K. embodies the cure which is based on a
Western education charged with a large dose of compassion. Mr. K.'s curing of the monk takes on an added significance, for it is Lee's suggestion that society's ills can be cured by a modern education based on a balanced recognition of the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of the community.

*Flowers in the Sky* leaves the dark and pessimistic world of Lee's short stories behind. In this novel Lee harmonizes the main racial groups as well as their differences in their interaction with one another. While the success of the novel lies in his portrayal of a Malaysian story employing themes, techniques and language to achieve this, the lasting triumph of the novel lies in the hope for the society which lies within the power of its own people.

In the tradition of Chinese writers who, throughout the centuries of rule of numerous dynasties and now the republic, look for a medium to express their concerns and criticisms of emperors and governments, Lee uses the misfit to express the plight of the people who are discriminated against, in particular the Chinese migrants, in a multicultural society. His characters' search for identity leads the readers' attention to various aspects of alienation which in turn make misfits of these characters.

The readers sympathize with Lee, the writer, who faces all kinds of difficulties, which range from exclusion from the country's literary prizes and privileges to the discouragement of the government. Lee, the artist as misfit, is an appropriate chronicler of the other misfits of society -- the self exile, the guilty, the thief, and the murderer are people who are alienated from a cruel and oppressive community which can no longer satisfy their needs while the mutilated, the voiceless, the helpless, the weak and suppressed women are victims of the abuse of power and authority. Much of the landscape of Lee's fiction is sombre, decaying and depressing. These physically, emotionally and spiritually mutilated people who reside in this deformed world are
metaphors of the oppressed in a discriminatory society. Thus, Lee successfully circumvents the problems of Government censure to comment on and explore his society.

Yet the tone of his fiction is not hopeless. In many of his stories there is a calm after a lot of pain for example, 'The T-Set' where the protagonist settles down to be a monk; The Mutes in the Sun where Met and Kee Huat free themselves from the oppressive power of Met's father by burning down the source of his wealth; 'Return to Malaya' where the hero hears the 'lusty' voices of children; and Flowers in the Sky where Mr. K. possesses the cure for his society in his skill and in his immense compassion for others. It is clear that the peaceful coexistence of and justice to the different racial groups and their positive attitude towards a harmonious future are the things 'that are important to [Lee]'.
References

Notes

Introduction

1 Lee Kok Liang in an interview with Dr. Paul Sharrad on Lee's visit to Australia in 1982. Dr. Sharrad has kindly allowed me to see a copy of this interview.

2 Biographical information about Lee Kok Liang can be found in John Barnes, 'The Fiction of Lee Kok Liang', Quadrant, January-February, 1985. p. 119.

3 Lee Kok Liang in an interview with Dr. Paul Sharrad.


Chapter One

1 Lloyd Fernando, Cultures in Conflict: Essays on Literature and the English Language in Southeast Asia, (Singapore: Graham Brash, (Pte.) Ltd., 1986), p. 120. Through the rest of this chapter the following abbreviations are used to identify sources of quotations: CC -- Lloyd Fernando, Cultures in Conflict: Essays on Literature and the English Language in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Graham Brash, (Pte.) Ltd., 1986); MS -- Lee Kok Liang, The Mutes in the Sun and Other Stories (Singapore: Federal Publications, (S) Pte. Ltd., 1991); DC -- Lee Kok Liang, Death is a Ceremony and Other Short Stories (Singapore: Federal Publications, (S) Pte. Ltd., 1992); FS -- Lee Kok Liang, Flowers in the Sky (Singapore: Federal Publications, (S) Pte. Ltd., 1991).


3 Lee Kok Liang in an interview with Dr. Paul Sharrad.
Chapter Two


Chapter Three


4. Ibid., p.141.

Chapter Four


2 Ibid., p. 315.


Chapter Five


Chapter Six

1 'Straits born' is a term applied to the Chinese born in the British Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, Province Wellesley and Singapore.


3 'Surangama Sutra' is a sermon in which Buddha revealed the causes of illusion leading to the creation of the worlds of existence and the methods of escaping from these.
The Tantric sect worships the Divine as two principles, male and female; Shiva, the masculine and Shakti, the supreme mother, who mediates between the Absolute and the relative. Shiva is Mind, but Shakti is the vitalizing creative power in matter and she dwells in man in the form of dynamic energy at the base of the spine. The energy is called Kundalini (the serpent energy) which when aroused uncoils itself. It is the aim of Tantric followers to awaken the pent-up Kundalini energy which will travel up the spine to the brain where it unites with Shiva, the Mind, in an embrace of love which is often portrayed sexually.

Krishna is the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and Radha is the cowherd girl whom he loves.


This version of the book's aim is taken from the summary on the back cover of the paperback edition (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, Asia, 1981).
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Lee Kok Liang in an interview with Dr. Paul Sharrad on Lee's visit to Australia in 1982. Unpublished typescript.


Ooi Boo Eng, 'Malaysia and Singapore' in Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Vol. XVI No. 2 (February 1982).

