The Infinite Longing for Home

Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam

David C.L. Lim

The Infinite Longing for Home

Cross Cultures

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Abbreviations

Texts

ATG	*Astonishing the Gods*
BFL	"Booked for Life"
BL	*Between Lives*
HTT	"Haunting the Tiger"
IFC	*In A Far Country*
IR	*Infinite Riches*
SOE	*Songs of Enchantment*
SONC	"Stars of the New Curfew"
TFR	*The Famished Road*
TR	*The Return*

Political Parties

AG	Action Group
Keadilan	Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party)
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NCNC	National Council of Nigerian Citizens
NPC	Northern People's Congress
PAS	Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
UMNO	United Malay National Organisation

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Introduction

> Desire is an infinite metonymy, it slides from one object to another. [… Its] 'natural' state is thus that of melancholy – the awareness that no positive object is 'it', its proper object, that no positive object can ever fill out its constitutive lack.[1]

The Premise

IN THE BEGINNING, before the emergence of the Word, there was nothing, nothing but the internal churning of infinite longing and sadness in Nature. Nature was permeated by a deep, unappeasable melancholy, because although it yearned to reach and define itself, it was unable to do so, since the spoken Word was not yet given. That is why the emergence of the Word in man is the answer to Nature's deadlock, for "Only in man […] is the Word completely articulate."[2] With the revelation of speech, Nature is raised from potentiality to actuality – redeemed, in a word. But redemption comes at the price of its alienation from itself, of the externalization of the power of its centre in a medium outside itself, in man, the subject of enunciation, who is "not part of nature, but Nature's Other."[3] This Schellingian logic of symbolization, redemption and alienation has been shown by Slavoj Žižek to apply also to the subject as conceptualized by Jacques Lacan. Prior to subjectivization, man is not the 'I' of self-experience but a pulsation of drives, a pure im-

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[1] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York: Verso, **1997**): **81**.

[2] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, tr. & intro. James Gutmann (*Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, **1809**, tr. **1936**; La Salle IL: Open Court, **1992**): **39**.

[3] Slavoj Žižek & F.W.J. Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, **1997**): **43**.

personal *Wollen* ('Willing') for an indeterminate something.[4] It is only and precisely by means of his[5] passage from the closed circuit of drives to the open world of signs that man acquires being. The passage opens up a distance from himself, a space in which he can begin to find his meaning in articulate speech. Words give him his moorings and reference points, a sense of definition and equilibrium. But ultimately "words fail."[6] Hard as he tries, he can never say it all or say enough about who he 'really' is; he can never fully capture himself in language. Language simultaneously creates and displaces him from himself, and it is in the yearning, searching movement of language that he becomes metaphorized as a subject of desire.

In this book, I argue that the above-described Schellingian mood permeates selected writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam. We will see that the fictional universe textualized by these two authors is a universe veiled by a strange longing and sadness. In it, and in their own ways, the central figures all long to belong, to find that elusive 'home' in themselves and the fractured country into which they have been thrown. Azaro, the lonely spirit-child protagonist in Okri's *abiku* trilogy, for instance, spends his whole life wandering the road of destiny in search of the sublimity of living in a ravaged African nation not dissimilar to Nigeria. Similarly, in Maniam's novel *In A Far Country* (*IFC*), Rajan, the protagonist, aches to belong in "that vast country [...] called life" (**144**) and in Malaysia, a country with "many countries inside that one country" (**116**). 'Home', in Okri and Maniam, could be a domestic site of comfort and security, an imaginary inner space insulated from the threatening disorder of the outside world, or simply a house, the ownership of which is symbolic of the stake one has in the land beneath one's feet. 'Home' may be the mythic homeland left behind by one's (migrant) forebear, the discursive locus of self-positing, the proof of love one desires from the Other, or the nebulous Other-Place towards which one sometimes, in moments of desolation, lapses into entertaining a nostalgic relationship. 'Home' may also be coextensive with the nationalized space of one's domicile, a rallying ground for reactionary nationalisms, an imaginative evocation necessitated by the failure of independence and the nation-form to fully deliver on their promise, or the future-nation one

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[4] Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London & New York: Verso, **1996**): **14**.

[5] For the sake of simplicity and not because the male is privileged, the masculine pronoun will henceforth be used to refer to the subject instead of the cumbersome 'he/she' or the strange-sounding 'it'.

[6] Jacques Lacan, *Television*, tr. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss & Annette Michelson (*Télévision*, **1974**; New York: W.W. Norton, **1990**): **3**.

seeks to realize by means of sociopolitical mobilization. 'Home' is clearly multilocal, yet it is, paradoxically, never fully ours for all times, despite one's never-ending search for it. Experienced at most as something missed, it is what Lacan would call "the never-here," since "it is here when I search there; [and] it is there when I am here."[7]

What precisely is the nature of this infinite longing, this *Gelüst* ('craving that does not involve the head') for 'home' that propels Okri's and Maniam's characters to experience the world in their idiosyncratic ways? And how is this related to the nation as a concept and to the discourse of nationhood with regard to Nigeria and Malaysia? This book is an attempt to provide an answer to these questions. It sets out to examine Okri's and Maniam's articulation and problematization of the 'good nation' within and beyond their respective homelands. It looks into the motives and means by which peoples forced to live together in a country love and hate each other and the disavowed truths about themselves. It considers why some embrace heterogeneity and open-endedness while others are threatened by difference and compelled to organize their lives around the fantasy that happiness will arrive when 'they' are put in their proper place. Lastly, this book identifies in Okri's and Maniam's writings a way out of today's political aporia, a Lacanian path to freedom and the creation of a new society humbled and unified by the full recognition of its participation in flawed humanity.

The key texts I have chosen to study here are Okri's *abiku* trilogy: namely, *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*; and Maniam's first two novels, *The Return* and *In A Far Country,* as well as two of his short stories, "Booked for Life" and "Haunting the Tiger." Why Okri and Maniam? The basis for my studying the works of these two writers is neither the superficial fact that they are postcolonial writers – writers who happen to be born in former British colonies – nor any similarities in their personal backgrounds and stylistic techniques. What interests me, rather, is their engagement with issues related to the problematic intersubjective relation of the subject to himself and others, a subject delimited within a particular nation-space which cannot simply be exchanged for another, a space which is, like it or not, his home. As far as I know, there has not been any sustained attempt at a comparative politico-literary study of these two authors' texts and their historical milieu. This is perhaps unsurprising, since Africa (Nigeria) and Asia

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[7] Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey & Eugenio Donato (Baltimore MD & London: Johns Hopkins UP, **1972**): **196**.

(Malaysia) are generally regarded as being so vastly different and far removed from one another that they hardly ever figure in each other's imagination. This, I feel, is sufficient reason to study the two (Okri/Nigeria and Maniam/ Malaysia) side by side, if only to see if they might have something worthwhile to say to and about one another, and if intellectual bridges may not be built between these seemingly disparate southern worlds.

The approach I take in this book may be described as 'postcolonial', if one wishes to describe it as such, in the sense that it revolves around issues of identity and power in relations between colonizer and colonized, and between once-colonized local factions, and also insofar as it works to undermine particular 'truths' emanating from multiple loci (the West *and* the non-West) that are used to justify oppression in its multiple and hybrid forms. Having said this, I should signal that I do not consciously set out to fit my argument into any established postcolonial mould or to map its terrain according to the coordinates set by such postcolonial theorists as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said. Instead, I follow a different current, using Lacan, Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe as my key theoretical anchors. I opt to do this for two reasons, aside from the motive of my personal interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis. First, existing exegeses of Okri's and Maniam's texts have emerged mainly from familiar postcolonial paradigms, and I believe, as I try to show, that a somewhat different approach (a Lacanian one, to be precise) can further open up the texts and reveal more layers of their signifying potential which may otherwise remain occluded. Second, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a sufficiently elaborate and systematic theory of the subject which is not always found in general postcolonial critiques (where the subject is all too often inadequately described, in the tradition of what Žižek calls "spaghetti structuralism,"[8] as fragmented, always-already hybridized, or in the process of becoming). The kind of grounding that Lacanian theory provides is crucial if we are to make our point on such key notions as agency, causality, truth, and freedom in relation to Okri's and Maniam's selected writings, and if one is to posit an ethics which locates the subject as the alpha and omega of his destiny, a destiny he can only fully assume by leading himself back to his signifying dependence.

Before elaborating on this in the next section, it would be useful if we first attended to the more basic task of dispelling some persistent misunderstandings about psychoanalysis and its uses. Why use psychoanalytic theory to critique Okri's and Maniam's writings? Is psychoanalysis (and the concepts it

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[8] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989): 27.

originates, such as the Oedipus complex, the unconscious, and so forth) not a product of Freud's sexist genital fixation and the West's heterosexual patriarchal system, both of which have little to do with the 'indigenous' cultures of the 'third world' authors under study? By using it in our reading, are we not, as detractors would claim, imposing an alien (eurocentric) system of thought on what is uniquely local, thereby distorting the object of study in the same way that colonial census practices distorted the local realities they sought to explain? By way of responding to these standard arguments against psychoanalysis, one should first of all note that they are precariously premissed on (false) differences between the 'West' and the 'non-West', two problematic terms which become ever more emptied of meaning the more they are unpacked. One should also point out that, although psychoanalysis formally originates in Freud's Viennese and central European milieu, it does not necessarily follow that its discoveries, such as "the ego is not master in its own house,"[9] are inapplicable elsewhere, or that to use it in a different cultural context is to automatically render one's analysis ahistorical and useless. It also does not follow that psychoanalytic theory has by default less explanatory or illuminative power than 'indigenous' theories. In any case, what ultimately counts for our practical purposes is not whether one conceptual framework is more 'authentic' than another, but whether the adopted framework works well enough to yield the kind of illumination we seek.

Of course, to argue that psychoanalysis is useful is not to claim that it is a *Weltanschauung* or a philosophy that provides *the* key to the universe. Psychoanalysis is not a metatheory of everything, something to be taken literally or as corresponding perfectly with the 'really existing' reality. So, for instance, when Freud talks about the prohibition of the father and the castration of the subject, he is not claiming that, at some point in the past, Daddy must have literally "towered over his brat playing with his wee-wee," saying "We'll cut it off, no kidding."[10] Similarly, when Lacan in his return to Freud upholds the primacy of the phallus, he is far from saying that women's bodies are truly incomplete because they lack the almighty penis which they desire. Lacan has stated explicitly that the phallus is not "the organ, penis or clito-

[9] Sigmund Freud, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-analysis," (**1917**), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. **17** (**1917–1919**): *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, tr. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, **1955**): **143**.

[10] Lacan, *Television*, **27–28**.

ris"[11] but "the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire."[12] That is to say, it is symbolic of the subject's constitutive lack, of his separation by the wall of language from the lost-absent object of his desire which promises the plenitude of home.

Subject of Desire

One of the Lacanian underpinnings of this book is that desire is the very dynamic of our being. Desire springs from what we lack inside. But it does not denote, as in common usage, 'what I want', since I do not actually desire what I want. My desire can never be satisfied by any positive object, because what I desire is ultimately impossible, something that cannot be had, simply because it does not exist. The Lacanian subject is by definition ignorant of the ironic truth about his founding conditions. In vain he pursues the lost-absent Thing of his desire, going from one object to another, saying with each encounter, 'I am not where It is'. He suffers from his belief in the power of the Object. But he also derives *jouissance* or "pleasure *and* pain […] as a single packet"[13] from the infinitely deferred reunion with the Object he posits as lost, even though it was never in his possession. His entire being revolves around and is, in fact, sustained by this strange pleasure, which comes at the price of suffering.

Lacan's reformulation of the Freudian subject as an enjoying mistake arising out of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) is set out in his famous lecture "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I." In it, he posits that, before the advent of the empirical ego, there is no distinction between self and other, being and non-being, the 'I' and the 'non-I'. The infant begins life without consciousness of himself as a distinct self. Originally a discordant closed circuit of partial drives, he remains thus until somewhere between the age of six and eighteen months, when he experiences for the very first time a sense of ontological coherence through the recognition of his own image in the mirror. The startling spectacle of himself out there reflected back at him gives the child great narcissistic joy as he fixes his attitude "in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze."[14] But the child's jubilance is short-lived, for almost as soon as he finds himself in the specular Other, he is

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[11] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (*Écrits*, 1966; London & New York: Routledge, 2001): 316.

[12] Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 318.

[13] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, 189.

[14] Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 2.

snatched away from himself.[15] As Nick Mansfield puts it: “Your selfhood – your subjective centre of gravity – is grounded outside of you, in the very field of images from which you first gained a sense of separation. In short, your selfhood makes you alien to yourself.”[16]

The subject is alienated from himself the moment he misrecognizes the unitary self in the mirror as himself, and it is this illusory lost unity that the subject strives to re-find upon his entry into the Symbolic order. The Symbolic is Lacan’s name for the Saussurean world of language which “provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being.”[17] In the symbolic world of language, words allow the subject to recognize himself as this or that. They compensate for the Object from which the subject is excommunicated by allowing him to articulate his lack, desire and suffering. But words are never enough. The subject will never find full satisfaction in them because of his ‘castration’ by the effects of language. “He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverised, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech.”[18]

Constituted within a given socio-symbolic network, the Lacanian subject of desire is a being-in-language, a subject of discourse caught up in the language hammock that receives and at the same time imprisons him. But he is not nothing but language, an ongoing text, or the dispersion of subject-positions as postulated in the mass-culture version of poststructuralist and post-

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[15] In Lacan’s revised version of his theory of the mirror stage (1960s), the mirror image is invested with libido and internalized as the core of the infant’s ego *only as a result* of the affirmation, acknowledgment or approval of the parent who is holding the child before the mirror (or watching the child look at itself in the mirror). The mirror image does not become formative of the ego unless it is ratified by an-Other person, that is, the caretaker or someone of importance to the child. The child’s desire becomes tied to the approval or recognition of this Other. He internalizes what he perceives to be the latter’s ideals, and his actions becomes judged as estimable or shameful according to the way in which he perceives the Other perceiving him. See Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 1997).

[16] Nick Mansfield, *Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000): 43.

[17] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. Russell Grigg (*Le Séminaire, Livre III: Les Psychoses*, 1981; New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1993): 179.

[18] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques–Alain Miller, tr. Alan Sheridan, intro. David Macey (*Le Séminaire de Jacques Lucan, Livre XI: Les Quatre Concepts Fondamentaux de la Psychoanalyse*, 1973; London: Vintage, 1998): 188.

colonial theories. In Lacan, "everything that I positively am, every enunciated content I can point to and say 'that's *me*', is not 'I'; I am only the void that remains, the empty distance toward every content."[19] 'I' *qua* subject is originally devoid of any substantial content; he is nothing but an endless craving for an acceptable conception of himself so that he may walk with assurance in this life. The subject is only subjectivized when he submits to the Law of signs, internalizes social narratives, and becomes systematized as his own discourse. Unlike the Althusserian–Foucauldian subject, the Lacanian subject is not a discourse passively interpellated by other discourses. Far from being simply acted upon, the subject has vast resources for ideological and psychoanalytic *resistance*. As Marshall W. Alcorn Jr. explains, resistance is a key indicator which "implies agency, an ability to counteract forces that in other contexts would successfully constitute subjects."[20] The subject has the power of determination to do many things. He can resist and contain conflictual knowledge that threatens to undermine his ego. He can deny an understanding of the cause of his suffering and *jouissance*. And he can refuse to let go of the only thing he can more or less be sure of – his conception of 'who he really is'; for without it life is not worth living.

All this does not mean the Lacanian subject is entirely free to develop according to his personal wants and desires, and shift his identification from one thing to another as he pleases ('follow your heart', 'rewrite your past', and 'be yourself', to put it in the language of popular psychology). The paradox in Lacan is that the subject is fully determined neither by his surroundings nor by himself but is from the outset unconsciously predetermined by some senseless contingency, by what Lacan describes as "the first choice, the first seat of subjective orientation," which "will henceforth regulate the entire function of the pleasure principle."[21] Echoing the Freudian "choice of neurosis" (*Neurosenwahl*), the "first grinding" (*mouture première*),[22] which occurs early in the history of the subject, is a traumatic encounter that forever contaminates his psychic development, his choice of passions and ethical imperatives in life.

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[19] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham NC: Duke UP, **1993**): **40**.

[20] Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., "The Subject of Discourse: Reading Lacan through (and beyond) Poststructuralist Contexts," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, ed. Mark Bracher, et al. (New York & London: New York UP, **1994**): **29**.

[21] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, **54–55**.

[22] *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, **54**.

Political Desires

Predisposed by his first grinding and carried along by the force of natural causality, the Lacanian subject actively negotiates and in time arrives at a relatively stable conception of himself, at a master-discourse that accounts for his radical lack, for why he does not feel 'at home' inside. It is a discourse to which he grows passionately attached, a knowledge he takes as his truth even though it is full of holes. For example, the subject may be convinced that wherever he goes, he is first and foremost a Malay. He may believe that there is an uncontaminated dividing-line between his race and other races, and that members of his race should consolidate their hold on power "regardless of whether it was fair or unfair to the other races," to quote Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding father.[23] Strangely enough, he may still believe all that (and may perhaps even be prepared to suffer and die for his belief) even if he knows full well (but cannot bring himself to believe) that race is not a valid scientific or genetic category but a phantasmic essence, a master-signifier of some seemingly transparent endogenous difference which manifests itself as tribe, culture, religion, or other 'natural' determiners of identity.

From what we have seen so far, it should be clear that the subject's pursuit of his desire is not simply an intimate, personal matter to be worked out in the privacy of his interiority. As Ellie Ragland underscores, the desiring subject who believes with absolute certainty that "I AM = I AM KNOWLEDGE = I AM THE ONE WHO KNOWS" can seriously harm those over whom he has power.[24] In the realm of politics, he who is absolutely certain that he is knowledge would qualify as what Lacan calls "blind master." He is the one who rules in order not to see, speaks so that others will say he is right, and wages war so that he need not admit that he lacks anything.[25] Working in the service of the political blind master is the academic, defined in Lacan's theory of the four discourses as the one who consciously or otherwise produces the university discourse or the kind of knowledge that purports to enlighten but in effect rationalizes and legitimates the master's discourse. Complementing the master and the academic is the hysteric or the 'idiot',[26] the feeble subject who

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[23] Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, **1998**): **549**.

[24] Ellie Ragland, "The Discourse of the Master," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Willy Apollon & Richard Feldstein (Albany NY: State U of NY P, **1996**): **134**.

[25] Ragland, "The Discourse of the Master," **142**.

[26] *Idiôtês*, 'foreign to such or such profession, ignorant'; Jacques–Alain Miller, "Microscopia: An Introduction to the Reading of Television," tr. Bruce Fink, in Jacques

always requires an Other who will be the master. He is the one who enjoys abandoning himself to the master's discourse, in taking the imperatives the master institutes as supreme as truth itself. Lastly, there is the "nonidiot" or the analyst who is "savvy"[27] enough to de-identify with the master's discourse and to know that the "master place is never occupied but by what Lacan called a *semblant*, which one might translate in your language as a 'make-believe.'"[28] In different guises, these four subjects – the master, the academic, the hysteric, and the analyst – are ever-present in Okri's and Maniam's writings. In Parts II and III, we will look at the roles these subjects play and the political dynamics they generate in the context of nation-building.

The Structure

The themes and issues identified above are discussed in three parts. Part I contains two chapters. Chapter 1 looks at several conceptions of the nation and nationalism from the viewpoint of a range of thinkers including Fanon, Soyinka, Chatterjee, Renan, Anderson, Žižek, and Laclau and Mouffe. Theories covered in Chapter 1 are contextualized in Chapter 2 when I critically survey the history and politics of nationhood in Nigeria and Malaysia, and at the same time establish a horizon against which Okri's and Maniam's novels are read in Parts II and III. I will trace the fracture-lines and foreground key moments in the history of the two countries from precolonial times to the present, focusing on nodal points alluded or referred to in the two authors' works.

Part II, which consists of three chapters, focuses on Okri's writings and his three-pillared philosophy. Chapter 3 examines *The Famished Road* (*TFR*), the first book in the *abiku* trilogy. It starts off by drawing links between the trilogy and Nigeria, Okri's country of origin. It then relates this to what is arguably the most striking trope in the novel: the *abiku* phenomenon which symbolizes the waxing and waning of the nation's will to sustain its future flowering. I also examine the hidden dimensions of suffering and the paradoxical ways in which Okri believes *jouissance* may be harnessed from suffering to resuscitate the undead nation. In relation to this, I analyse Okri's politico-spiritual conceptions of predestination and agency, and the Lacanian ways in which they depart from indigenous African conceptions. Chapter 3

Lacan, *Television*, tr. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss & Annette Michelson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990): xxv.

[27] Lacan, *Television*, 3.

[28] Miller, "Microscopia," xxx.

also looks at Okri's conceptualization of humankind as *homo fabula* or story-telling beings who possess an overlooked capacity to heal profound sicknesses of the spirit through fictions and stories. Through Dad, the *abiku* narrator's father, we will discuss Okri's Lacanian notion of the 'subject of drive', the logic of 'belief before belief' by which agency is exercised and concrete political changes are wrought, and the notion of the 'authentic act' (the revolutionary kind that 'changes everything') which must be performed if the unborn nation is to break its *abiku* cycle.

Within the parameters of Okri's philosophy set out in Chapter **3**, Chapter **4** opens by revisiting the question of Africa and its place in the world. Much has been said about the traumatic impact of colonialism upon the continent and its peoples. Is it possible, however, that colonialism did not penetrate the kernel of Africa, as Okri believes? If so, what are the implications? This is the main focus of my exegesis of *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*), the second book in the *abiku* trilogy. Instead of rehearsing the entire debate on the colonizer–colonized binary and related concepts, Chapter **4** will take it as over-familiar to the reader and proceed to ask just one question: where does Okri sit in this familiar landscape? The impact of colonialism is clearly a big issue for Okri, as his writings attest. Yet he vehemently rejects the 'postcolonial' label. Why? What does he mean when he says that "the whole context of the margin, the periphery, postcolonial and stuff like that" constitutes "poor descriptions of the work that some of us are trying to do"?[29] Also on the agenda in Chapter **4** is a critique of the notion of the "African Way" foregrounded in *SOE*. I compare Okri's philosophy behind it with Léopold Sédar Senghor's much-maligned Negritude, link it his idea of "universal civilization," and measure it against a similar idea propounded by Senghor.

Chapter **5** focuses on *Infinite Riches* (*IR*), the final book in the *abiku* trilogy. *IR*'s uniqueness calls for a slightly different approach (a historical one) from the approach I take in reading the first two books. *IR*, as we shall see, is not only the 'angriest' anti-colonial writing Okri has produced to date, it is also the most historically engaged and politically subversive volume in the trilogy. The novel introduces a major new character, the racist Governor-General of the unborn African nation who, by virtue of his nefariousness, eclipses everyone else in the book. In his English ways, he oppresses the people, rigs the independence elections, rewrites the continent's past and alters its present. Why is the harshest treatment accorded to this particular British administrator? Does it not somehow besmirch the good name of the actual-historical

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[29] Delia Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods: An Interview with Ben Okri," *Island* **71** (**1997**): **44**.

Governor-General who oversaw Nigeria's transition to independence in the late 1950s? As our argument develops, it will become clear that Okri sometimes blurs the line between fiction and historical reality – not because it is the 'postmodern' thing to do but because he appears to have something very important to reveal about Nigeria and its wounded destiny, some 'dirty secret' presently obscured by dominant accounts of the country's history. In the second section of our discussion of *IR* in Chapter 5, we will look at Okri's blurring of the line between fiction and reality – this time in relation to magical realism. The fictional universe in Okri's trilogy does not always follow the laws of the universe as we know them, and because Okri is most famous for his trilogy (*TFR* to be exact), he has come to be popularly known as a magical-realist writer of the same type as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie. Is that an accurate and fair description of what Okri tries to do in his writings? We will examine that question before closing with a critique of Okri's belief that words are things, and nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves.

From Okri we shift our focus to K.S. Maniam in Part III, which begins with a reframing of Maniam's two novels, *The Return* (*TR*) and *In A Far Country* (*IFC*), as two thirds of a trilogy which has yet to be formally realized. Chapter 6 explains this and examines the overarching feature that unites the would-be trilogy, namely the curse of the 'eternal return'. Inherited by Maniam's protagonists, the curse forever bars those afflicted with it from ever finding the 'home' they seek. It is that which they must cancel out of existence, just as Okri's characters must break the *abiku* cycle. But can it be done? Our answer is yes and the key, as will be explained, lies in what I call the 'logic of freedom'. With *TR* as the prime site of our investigation in Chapter 6, we will see that the curse of the eternal return is not just a 'personal thing' but has far reaching cultural and political implications too. This, as we delve into Maniam's portrayal of *TR*'s subjects of desires (Ravi, Naina, Periathai), will be fleshed out in the context of Malaysian nationhood.

My approach to *TR* and *IFC* goes against the grain, insofar as it challenges the standard reading of both texts as Maniam's thesis on the therapeutic goodness of 'roots'. Maniam writes about cultural, migrant, and colonial experiences, but that does not mean he advocates cultural loyalty, as some critics claim. Nor does it mean that he writes from the Indian migrant perspective or that he regards all things English as degenerate. In my critique of *IFC* in Chapter 7, the last chapter of this book, we will see that the text occupies a much more radical position than critics have given it credit for. I argue that *IFC*, instead of affirming racial stereotypes, suspends them in order to understand anew the basis of racism in Malaysia. In addition, it rethinks, instead of simply accepting, the commonsense understanding of such notions as culture,

truth, and freedom. Lastly, in Chapter 7, we will look at a new form of heroism that must be actualized if Malaysia is to realize its radical possibilities.

About Okri and Maniam

Ben Okri was born in **1959** in Minna, central Nigeria. He started writing creatively from his failure to get a place at a university in Nigeria. His early works were published in women's magazines and evening newspapers. One of the pieces he wrote was about charlatans. It grew and grew and eventually became *Flowers and Shadows*, his first novel which he completed by the time he was eighteen years old. In **1978** he began studying comparative literature at Essex University but was later forced to withdraw from the course when his scholarship was terminated by the cost-cutting government of Shehu Shagari, President of Nigeria's Second Republic. Okri has since published a total of fourteen books, including essays (*Birds of Heaven*, *A Way of Being Free*), poetry (*An African Elegy*, *Mental Fight*) and short stories (*Incidents at the Shrine*, *Stars of a New Curfew*). His novels include *Astonishing the Gods*, *Dangerous Love* and the latest, *In Arcadia*. Okri won the Booker Prize for *The Famished Road* in **1991**. He lives in London, England.

K.S. Maniam was born in **1942** in Bendong, a town in the northern state of Kedah, Malaysia. He was raised in a hospital compound, where his father worked as a launderer. For a year, he attended a Tamil school that catered mainly to children from nearby rubber estates. Maniam was transferred to an English school after he stood up one day and demanded to go to such a school or no school at all. After completing secondary school, Maniam left for India to read medicine. There, he had a change of heart and moved to Wolverhampton, England, where he took a teacher-training course. In **1970** he enrolled for a BA (English) at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. After graduating in **1973**, he went on to pursue an MA at the same university, where he subsequently worked as a lecturer until retirement. Maniam wrote poetry in the **1960**s and the **1970**s. "The Eagle" (**1975**), a short story, was his first published work. To date, he has published four volumes of short stories (*Plot, The Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories*; *Arriving ... and Other Stories*; *Haunting the Tiger*; *Faced Out*), a collection of plays and short stories (*Sensuous Horizons*) and three novels (*The Return*, *In A Far Country, Between Lives*). In **2000**, Maniam received the first Raja Rao Award for outstanding contributions to South Asian diaspora literature. (The award was instituted by the Samvad India Foundation, which was co-founded by Vijay Mishra.) He lives with his wife and two children in Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

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PART I
NATION(S)

I love my country, but since I love in my country
something more than it, I mutilate it.[1]

[1] Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London & New York: Verso, **1998**): **79**.

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1 Nation: Conceptions

Introduction

IN THE DISCOURSE OF NATIONHOOD, reference is invariably made to the link between the nation-state and modernity – or, more precisely, European modernity, which began with the commencement of the Enlightenment. From the eighteenth-century onwards, Europe had not only evolved from the agrarian to the industrial phase, it had also begun to re-order its thoughts, institutions and values through a process of formal rationalization. As well, it had come to see itself as more advanced and superior to its unenlightened medieval past. Europe's modernist urge for progress and freedom has been credited with the dismantling of feudalism and the liberation of communities from oppression. As with the nation-state, nationalism too has been ascribed as a product of the Enlightenment, "insofar as it endorsed the democratic notion of popular sovereignty that treated people as citizens of a nation rather than subjects of a monarch."[1] In this eurocentric scheme of things, non-European societies are seen as primitive, still stuck on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder, and therefore transient, since it is their transhistorical destiny to become modern. Their evolution towards this goal is said to have properly begun with the advent of colonialism, which supplanted indigenous systems with what modernity had to offer. The implicit assumption here is that the postcolonial nation, which owes its founding to colonialism, is no more than a perpetual consumer of modernity.[2] It need not even use its imagination to form a national community, since the colonial impact itself had set the inevitable in motion. Worse, according to the logic, postcolonial peoples

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[1] Stephanie Lawson, "The Authentic State: History and Tradition in the Ideology of Ethnonationalism," in *The State in Transition: Reimagining Political Space*, ed. Joseph A. Camilleri et al. (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, **1995**): **80**.

[2] Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community," in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London & New York: Verso, **1996**): **216**.

are not only passive consumers of the national form, they are also inept at governing their country and practising Western democracy, as is evident from the countless sociopolitical upheavals that have wrecked so many Third-World countries.

What Basil Davidson calls the "curse"[3] of the colonial legacy that is the postcolonial nation is all too familiar to us. In parts of Africa, as in Asia, the euphoria of decolonization and independence was succeeded by widespread disillusionment and the deepening of pre-existing antagonisms. Postcolonial elites betrayed the nation's founding dream and the masses became bloodthirsty over race, religion, and land. The partitioning of India and Pakistan, for example, resulted in the death of over a million Muslims and Hindus, who slaughtered each other over these three passions. Millions more in Sudan and Nigeria have perished under similar circumstances. Malaysia, too, has had its share of spilled blood. On 13 May 1969, Malays massacred several hundred ethnic Chinese in a series of race riots at the instigation of Malay elites – or, in a different version of the event, when Malays defended themselves against the Chinese, who allegedly wanted all Malays to die and all aborigines to return to the jungle, as reported by the National Operations Council.[4] If, as it appears, independence is about the elite class using its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners, if atrocities inflicted upon the people by the often-invisible hands of these elites have in some cases been worse than the atrocities inflicted by the colonial masters they replaced, and if the betrayed masses have for the most part received mere scraps of the spoils of independence, how, then, does one justify the postcolonial nation's existence? Is its creation necessarily the righting of historical oppression? And, as Wole Soyinka poses, "what price a nation?"[5] If the nation only creates a fragile sense of belonging that glosses over seemingly unbridgeable differences between the disparate communities constituting the nation, would it be justified to say that it is "a mere sentimental concept, unfounded in any practical advantages for its occupants" and that "the only hard fact that confers the status of nationhood on any human collectivity is its right to issue passports"?[6] Given these circumstances, what should one say about the idea of un-

[3] Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Times Books, 1992).

[4] *The May 13 Tragedy: A Report* (Kuala Lumpur: National Operations Council, 1969): 29.

[5] Wole Soyinka, The *Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996): 19.

[6] Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 20.

questioning national unity as an absolute good? Chinua Achebe's response sums up the position taken in this book: "Quite clearly it is nonsense."[7]

Definitions

Before proceeding to unpack the issues raised above, let us first clarify the term 'nation' and distinguish the ways in which it differs conceptually from 'state' and 'nation-state'. In our general usage, 'nation' simply means 'country', a social formation which appears, from a distance at least, as a homogeneous community which is attached to a particular territory and conscious of itself as a community with a shared myth of origin, culture, and project for the future. Of course, the reality is that few nations today are entirely homogeneous. What we are likely to find instead are multinational nations or nations containing subnations (ethnic, tribal, religious and so forth) within their frontiers. Multinational or otherwise, all nations are always, in one way or another, engaged in the process of nation-building, a process which may or may not require the reduction or erasure of group differences. Not all nations have their own 'state', defined here as a sovereign government (consisting of its agencies, bureaucracies, legislatures, institutions, agents, workers, and representatives) which, irrespective of its level of popularity, claims the sole right to rule a given territory. An example of this is Biafra, the Igbo nation which seceded from but was forcibly reabsorbed into Nigeria in the late 1960s. Today it exists as a (sub)nation within Nigeria but without a state that is recognized by other sovereign nations. Lastly, there is the 'nation-state', which Montserrat Guibernau defines as

> a modern phenomenon, characterized by the formation of a kind of state which has the monopoly of what it claims to be the legitimate use of force within a demarcated territory and seeks to unite the people subjected to its rule by means of homogenization, creating a common culture, symbols, values, reviving traditions and myths of origins, and sometimes inventing them.[8]

Guibernau's definition is useful in highlighting the ways in which nations, where they lack cohesion, have to be coercively wrought into shape by the state. It should be qualified, however, that no nation, however homogeneous it may be at a given time, ever comes into existence with a given set of unifying

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[7] Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1984): 12.

[8] Montserrat Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996): 47.

symbols and narratives without some form of coercion by representatives of diffuse political interests.

Nation, Race, Consciousness

The origin of the idea of the nation as an organic "extended family with one national character"[9] is commonly traced to Johann Gottfried Herder, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, who believed that the nation would be rendered unnatural and weakened should foreign races and nationalities become incorporated into the body politic. Measured by his standards, most countries today which are heterogeneous in make-up would qualify as what he called "patched up contraptions, fragile machines […] wholly devoid of inner life." This is, of course, a false assumption; a heterogeneous population is not necessarily a liability, as is proven by countries like the USA and Australia. In any case, ethnocultural homogeneity is hardly a sufficient basis for nation-creation. Indonesia and Malaysia are Muslim countries which, furthermore, share the same language, yet they are not one. The same may be said of Australia and New Zealand, and China and Taiwan. Herder's conception of the nation may be rejected as racist by today's standards, but its appeal is far from diminished. While academics grow hoarse reiterating that race is a social construct and "not a biological or genetic category with any scientific validity,"[10] race – conceived in biological and/or ethnocultural terms – continues to be invoked in many countries, including Nigeria, Malaysia, Fiji and South Africa, to mobilize support and to sharpen or blur group differences. The persistence of race in nation formation might appear as an aberration, but David Theo Goldberg posits that race is in fact "integral to the emergence, development, and transformations (conceptually, philosophically, materially) of the modern nation-state."[11] He argues that it is precisely in response to the increasing, even threatening, heterogeneity and hybridity of the modern world that the nation-state seeks to contain the Other through racial ordering, by, for instance, regulating the migration and immigration of other 'races' (through administrative practices which divide populations into racial groups), shaping the contours of racially conceived labour relations, managing mixed-racial

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[9] J.G. Herder, *J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, tr. F.M. Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969): 324.

[10] Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held & Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity, 1992): 297–98.

[11] David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 4.

intercourse, and licensing racist expression by doing little or nothing to prevent or contest it. The aim may be calculated solely to exclude others from profit and power, but lest we forget, on the level of affect the idea remains powerfully appealing that human groups possess different heritable physical, psychological, intellectual and moral traits that can be hierarchized on the basis of superiority and inferiority; an idea that transcends one's actual practices and experiences. As will be illustrated in the course of our discussion, the state and the layperson alike can articulate in rational terms the demand for a national privileging of a particular race for political reasons *and* out of the conviction that race is real and different races ought to be treated differently.

In contrast to the likes of Herder, another school of thought holds that the nation is bound together not so much by categories like race, culture and ethnicity as by consciousness. This conception of the nation can be traced to Ernest Renan, who identifies the "rich legacy of memories" (and the desire to live together) as the nation's cement.[12] It also recalls Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities," wherein the nation is conceived of as imagined into existence with the help of the novel and the newspaper.[13] These two forms of imagining provide the technical means for re-presenting the nation as a limited sovereign political community, enabling millions of its members who will never meet in person to conceive of a shared nationality in homogeneous empty time. In Anderson's words, they provide "a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together."[14] The notion of the nation as consciousness or a discursive formation (mediated by language and supported by print-capitalism) is not without its problems. One might ask, for example, whether the imagining community might not have an unconscious, unacknowledged past that dares not speak its name, as will be examined later.

Modernity and the Accidental Nation

Historically, the nation-state as a modern political mode of organization developed as a result of the functional needs of Europe's industrial economy. Modernity, associated with scientific rationalism and the separation of church and state, impelled Europe to break free from its agrarian past, undergo a new

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[12] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" ("Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", **1882**), in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London & New York: Routledge, **1990**): **19**.

[13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (**1983**; London & New York: Verso, **1991**): **24–25**.

[14] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, **36**.

division of labour, and create a uniform school-transmitted culture to allow its workforce to communicate competently.[15] It was a period of extreme societal re-adjustments, as well as the age of nationalism, a phenomenon that impelled Europe to go on a worldwide territorial expansion spree. Against this background, the postcolonial nation might be seen as 'inauthentic', insofar as the impetus for its transition from the agrarian to the industrial phase was not so much internally generated as it was externally imposed. It is, in the first instance, an accident reified in the process of Western capitalist expansion, a 'leftover' of colonialism and European modernity. To say that the postcolonial nation(-state) was created by aliens for alien purposes would, in fact, be putting it mildly. In Bertrand Badie's and Pierre Birnbaum's estimation,

> the 'state' is no more than an imported artifact in both Africa and Asia, a pale copy of utterly alien social and political systems, a foreign body that is not only inefficient and a burden on society but also a formenter of violence.[16]

According to Badie and Birnbaum, the state in the Third World is often no more than fragmented bureaucracies which, unlike in Europe, are neither always integrated into the political community nor counterbalanced by a civil society which is sufficiently organized to benefit from having bureaucracies in the first place.

Put simply, the postcolonial nation's problem is one of a radical incongruence between statehood and nationhood. Whereas Western Europe had the luxury of time to make the two coincide, postcolonial elites had, by and large, to make them overlap as much as possible within a short period of time just prior to independence. For many African nations, the problem is further compounded by their 'unnatural' topographical shapes. As a result of the Berlin carve-up of Africa in **1885** for economic exploitation by European powers, not only were territories simply parcelled off to colonial authorities, but cultural spaces and pre-existing political-economic units were arbitrarily dissected. Of the approximately fifty thousand miles of colonial frontiers, seventy-four percent were astronomical and mathematical lines which cut across one hundred and ninety-one cultural group areas, some of which were partitioned by more than one boundary. On top of that, former French colonies were deliberately divided into small and weak states before independence so that

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[15] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, **1983**): **36**.

[16] Bertrand Badie & Pierre Birnbaum, *The Sociology of the State*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (*Sociologie de l'Etat*, **1979**; Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, **1983**): **99**.

they would be dependent on France instead of challenging French domination in African affairs. Inter-tribal wars, irredentism and secessionist uprisings, which are all too evident today, are some of the consequences of Europe's carve-up and balkanization of Africa.

It is easy to blame colonialism for all that is wrong with the postcolonial nation, but what about the 'good' it introduced, such as "Britain's sense of justice, [and] its efficient and competent Civil Service"?[17] Might it not be said that if it hadn't been for colonialism (which precipitated the rapid development of European metropolitan centres and the incidental modernization of the postcolonial world), modernity would not have reached its advanced, global form today? If colonialism brought 'progress' to postcolonial peoples, should the latter not, at least, be appreciative enough to accept colonialism as "benevolent imperialism"[18] or a necessary evil that will culminate in the realization of a universalist ethical culture when the project of modernity reaches its conclusion? This line of argument is clearly unconvincing to those who not only have little faith in the aggressive, all-levelling means of the project but also in the project itself. The thesis of necessary evil may promise universal emancipation, but does it not in fact privilege Western purveyors of modernity and perpetuate the uneven global distribution of power for the infinity it takes to complete the project? Besides, it has been countered that the representation of Western modernity as the triumph of reason and superiority is in fact based on a highly selective or even arbitrary interpretation of evidence which creates the truth-effect that the non-Western world must assimilate Western practices before it can participate in the civilized global community. In any case, Indian nationalists have denounced colonialism for having compromised the principles of modernity, arguing that "the conditions of colonial rule necessarily limited and corrupted the application of the true principles of a modern administration."[19] Their quarrel is not with modernity but with colonialism and its institutions of power, which were simply "not modern enough."

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[17] K.O. Mbadiwe (Minister of Communications and Aviation, Nigeria), in *Nigeria Debates Independence: The Debate of Self-Government in the Federal House of Representatives on 26 March 1957, as recorded in the Official Report* (Lagos: Federal Information Service, **1957**): **40**.

[18] Chief Akintola, in *Nigeria Debates Independence*, **4**.

[19] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP): **15**.

The Nation-Thing

Clearly, if the postcolonial nation is to work, it must not only dismantle the mechanisms smuggled in by colonialism to render it structurally weak; its people must also be able to feel, or be made to feel by education or coercion, a sense of belonging to a community and to identify with a set of common beliefs and ways of life. National consciousness is a prerequisite for the national form, but it is also a persistent problem, for, "instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people," it has all too often turned out to be "only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been."[20] Nationalism has suffered such a bad reputation in the twentieth century that Tom Nairn declared it

> the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as 'neurosis' in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies), and largely incurable.[21]

Nationalism is Janus-faced, synonymous with emancipation on the one side and, on the other, with the explosion of primordial passions, fanatical violence and the egoistic urge to dominate. This raises the question: is nationalism modern, premodern, or both? Sanjay Seth argues that it is "neither a premodern survival nor a part of the modern era that is simultaneously a negation of modernity."[22] Nor is it "one of the detours by which the march of modernity is only made more secure."[23] Rather, like the modern state it serves to legitimate, nationalism is "very much part of the modern age," an answer to questions relating to boundaries and identities that become pressing only in the modern era. Sharing a similar view, Charles Taylor argues that modernity, like a giant wave that threatens to engulf traditional cultures, forces modernizing elites to assert national difference in the register of dignity and to refute

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[20] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean–Paul Sartre (*Les damnés de la terre*, **1961**; Harmondsworth: Penguin, **1967**): **119**.

[21] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neonationalism* (**1977**; London: NLB & Verso, **1981**): **359**.

[22] Sanjay Seth, "Nationalism in/and Modernity," in *The State in Transition: Re-imagining Political Space*, ed. Joseph A Camilleri et al. (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, **1995**): **41**.

[23] Seth, "Nationalism in/and Modernity," **42**.

the imputation of inferiority against the culture they identify with.[24] It is this engagement with one's sense of self-worth that gives nationalism its primordial appearance.

To answer the call to difference is essentially to define the nation and its people by means of predicative statements. It is to capture in language what Slavoj Žižek, in his Lacanian critique of ideology, terms the Nation-Thing. The Nation-Thing is that which makes us exclusive and unique as a nation. It appears to us "as something accessible only to us, something 'they', the others, cannot grasp."[25] Nationalist discourse constantly alludes to it and those who speak in the name of the nation never fail to underline its existence. Despite this, there is curiously little of substance that can be said about the Nation-Thing. All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its 'way of life', its

> cluster of customs, opinions and prejudices that include dietary practices, the sequestration or near-sequestration of [our] women, the sermons delivered by [our] mullah of choice, a loathing of modern society in general, riddled as it is with music, godlessness and sex, and a more particularised loathing (and fear) of the prospect that [our] own immediate surroundings could be taken over – 'westoxicated' – by the liberal, western-style way of life.[26]

Although we regard our national Thing as rightfully ours, it is, paradoxically, also something we must constantly re-find. There are, for instance, always more colonial chains to unshackle from our minds, the original grandeur of our culture to restore, and/or the surplus population of our country to be relegated to their proper place. All conditions must be met before we, the nation, can arrive at our rightful state of communitarian fullness. What this amounts to saying is that the Nation-Thing is an impossible object. We claim it is ours, but it can never fully be in our possession, since there will always be

> just one more matter to attend to, just one more precondition to fulfill [...] just one more account to settle. And with this just one more and one more and one more arises the structure of postponement and

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[24] Charles Taylor, "Nationalism and Modernity," in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. John A. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998): 206.

[25] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 201.

[26] Salman Rushdie, "A War that Presents Us All with a Crisis of Faith," *Guardian* (London; 3 November 2001), Saturday Review: 12.

> indirect living that keeps the system of excessive production going. The latter, of course, always knows how to present itself as an unconditionally 'good end' that deludes us with its light as though it were a real goal but that whenever we approach it recedes once more into the distance.[27]

In this precise sense, the nation-Thing is always already lost, "found at the most as something missed. One does not find it, but only its pleasurable associations."[28] We derive enjoyment from its absent presence, in the heightened anticipation of its return and the national 'completion' it promises to bring home. The truth that we do not have it is simply overlooked. No one wants to know the truth, because it is unbearable, which is why we rarely hear of anyone rallying for political support by reiterating to the masses that their celebrated national Thing does not exist, or that it exists only as the effect of their belief in its existence, and that the function of its existence is to conceal and at the same time embody the nation's (and by implication the nation-people's) lack of national essence.

Žižek argues that because the national Thing forever eludes predication, nationalist discourse must construct an Other, outsiders to whom we can impute an excessive enjoyment. These intruders want to steal our enjoyment and keep it for themselves. They want to ruin our way of life and reduce us to their level of depravity. 'They' can be just about anybody; Jews, for instance, are all too often vilified as hungering for the destruction of the Islamic Thing. Shifty aggressive Chinese in Malaysia are ever-ready to choke the life out of hospitable, gentle Malays. Immigrants are stealing all our jobs, and the syphilitic West, arguably the Mother of all Others, is defiling our purity. Blaming the Other is an expedient thing to do. It is also a good excuse for not confronting the fact that, all too often, "the disease that is in us, is from us."[29] Moreover – and we usually count ourselves out in this regard – when we fantasize about the Other enjoying itself at our expense, not only do we feel tortured, we even, to our horror, enjoy ourselves. Enjoyment (*jouissance*), as explained previously, is not pleasure in the everyday sense of the term but, rather, designates that which "emerges when the very reality that is the source of unpleasure, of pain, is experienced as a source of traumatic-excessive pleasure."[30]

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[27] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, tr. Michael Eldred (*Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols., 1983; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987): 194.

[28] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, 52.

[29] Rushdie, "A War that Presents Us All with a Crisis of Faith", 12.

[30] Slavoj Žižek & F.W.J. Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World*, 24.

As illustration, a person might commit adultery, experiencing terrible guilt, and yet find this sense of guilt intensifying the enjoyment of sinning. Similarly, the fantasy of how 'they' want to swamp our country and steal our precious national Thing (articulated in racial or religious terms) might disgust the fantasizing racist. Underneath it all, however, it is always possible that the racist is 'tickled' by the thought of the wretched outsiders coveting his Thing. Being tickled, after all, is at once intensely torturous and perversely enjoyable. Through the Other, the racist gets to recognize (again) the joy of the national Thing, which must now be defended even more strenuously.

Žižek's nation of enjoyment bears fundamental similarities with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's notion of the "impossible society."[31] For Laclau and Mouffe, modern society (or nation in our usage) is structured around a traumatic kernel (the Nation-Thing which lies outside the Symbolic order) that cannot be mastered but nevertheless functions as its unifying locus. This locus was in the past embodied in the prince and tied to a transcendental authority. Today, modern democratic society still turns around the same centre – except that the prince has vanished and the locus of power is empty. No individual or group can permanently occupy the place left vacant by the prince because national elections allow for a controlled contest with permanent rules and a periodical redistribution of power. At any one time there is always a plurality of nationalist discourses competing with each other for hegemony. Every emergent discourse must offer a credible and compelling imaginary framework through which society's gaps and fissures may be made sense of. Additionally, each discourse must aim to position itself not just as one alternative among many, but as the only possible framework for the resolution of society's crisis.

For Laclau and Mouffe, as for Žižek, hegemonic discourse has no transcendental authority which predetermines or guarantees its success. By the same logic, nothing – neither object nor event – has an objectivity to be refound. An earthquake or the falling of a brick may be grasped as a natural phenomenon or an expression of God's wrath. Similarly, an anti-government street protest may be constructed as proof of populist democracy, anti-democratic hooliganism, a Jewish conspiracy, and so forth. An object or event as such functions as a "floating signifier" that bears neither absolute non-fixity nor absolute fixity of meaning.[32] It has no objective necessity to signify anything in particular, although it may be sutured to any number of signifieds.

[31] Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, **1985**).

[32] Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, **111**.

The extent to which a discourse becomes dominant in the national imagination is substantially dependent upon the prevailing horizon of intelligibility or interpretative framework which delineates "what is possible, what can be said and done, what positions may legitimately be taken, what actions may be engaged in, and so forth."[33] It also hinges on the effectiveness of particular political struggles in recomposing that framework. When one discourse prevails over the others, it will begin to arrest the flow of differences, construct itself as the centre, depoliticize itself (suppress its political character, the fact that its institution is a political act par excellence), and rule out alternative frameworks for identification as "increasing illegitimate, immoral, irrational and finally incoherent."[34] Because hegemonic discourse is a usurper of the place of the prince, its hold on power can never be total. Alternative discourses can always be articulated in radicalized forms in counter-hegemonic struggles. By the same logic, society in Laclau and Mouffe's conception has no objective principle that holds it together as a field of differences. It has neither endogenous meaning nor internal necessity to discursively constitute itself this way or that, or to assume this or that form. The implication of this is not that 'everything is discourse' or that one discourse is as likely to gain currency as any other. The point is, rather, that "no guarantee of the permanence of a certain hegemonic arrangement is obtainable *outside the hegemonic struggle itself*."[35]

For Laclau and Mouffe, antagonisms arising from hegemonic struggles are simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for a 'free society': that is, a society from which antagonisms have been entirely eliminated. The logic is Lacanian at heart. When the Lacanian subject arrives at his 'final destination' after removing all the external blockages, what he will find is not the anticipated fullness of being but its radical opposite. He will discover that he is a signifier without a natural signified, that he has meaning only insofar as he misrecognizes his originary emptiness. Similarly, when society in Laclau and Mouffe's conception eliminates the Other it denigrates as the obstacle to and stain on its perfection, what it will find is not its crystallization as a homogeneous, harmonious totality but, rather, its dissolution (in the sense of becoming totalitarian). Society is in this precise sense impossible. Antagonisms must be eliminated before society can constitute it-

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[33] Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998): 64.

[34] Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe*, 171.

[35] Laclau, in Paul Bowman, "Politics, Polemics and Academics: An Interview [with Ernesto Laclau]," *Parallax* 5.2 (1999): 100.

self as a unitary One. Yet the realization of an antagonism-free and fully constituted society can only result in its radical negation, since, without an outlet for the heterogeneous communities to air and redress their problems, there can be no free society in the true sense of the word. In underlining the non-eradicable character of antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe are not saying that we should abandon the pursuit of the good society, embrace nihilism, aim for the total elimination of power, or accept all differences in political opinion as a positive good. Their point, rather, is that society, with all its local and historical peculiarities, exists only "in the pragmatic – and as a consequence always incomplete – movements of its affirmation."[36] It is "the product of hegemonic and contingent – and as such, always reversible – articulations and not [...] the result of immanent laws of history."[37] In other words, nothing is granted as destiny, since destiny is ultimately predestined by the social agent.

[36] Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* (London & New York: Verso, **1990**): **183**.

[37] Laclau, *New Reflections*, **189**.

2 Becoming Nations: Nigeria, Malaysia

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTER we examined some key issues in contemporary debates on nationhood. We considered the postcolonial nation as a by-product of modernity, a collective imagination, and an impossible Thing, among others. In this chapter, these theories will be contextualized, as we examine the discourse of nationhood in Nigeria and Malaysia and establish a historical horizon against which the novels of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam will be read in Parts II and III.

NIGERIA

Introduction

Nigeria has had so much 'bad luck' in its pursuit of nationhood that one cannot but joke about it at some point, if only to gain a little relief from the sadness of it all. One joke that immediately comes to mind concerns a Nigerian who dies and goes to Hell. In Hell, the Nigerian meets and subsequently befriends two recent arrivals: an American and a Briton. After getting to know each other, the three confer and agree that they should telephone their loved ones on earth to warn them that Hell is real. They negotiate with Satan and come to the agreement that each of them will pay the dollar equivalent of their telephone calls. After the calls are made, the American is billed twenty-five dollars and the Briton twenty dollars. The Nigerian is charged thirty-five cents. The American and the Briton immediately protest, demanding to know why the Nigerian is given a discount. "There is no special treatment here," assures Satan. "The Nigerian pays less because he only made a local call."

Nigeria, as the joke suggests, is not very far from hell. Indeed the proximity between the two has earned the world's largest black nation a string of negative appellations: "a mere geographical expression,"[1] "a mistake,"[2] "an

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[1] Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London: Faber & Faber, **1947**): **47**.
[2] Ahmadu Bello, *My Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, **1962**): **133**.

open sore,"[3] a "crippled giant,"[4] "a pariah nation,"[5] and "one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun."[6] These unflattering labels are not entirely unjustified, for it is well known that Nigeria is a difficult place to live in. It has been put through a succession of bloody military coups and counter-coups, interethnic and religious clashes, daylight assassinations of political figures, judicial murders, and state-sponsored executions. In addition, scores of Nigerian intellectuals have been stifled, persecuted, driven into exile, and killed. They include Christopher Okigbo, who was killed in the Biafran war, Ogaga Ifowodo, who was held in solitary confinement by the Abacha regime for his outspoken criticism of the government, and Ken Saro–Wiwa, who was executed in 1995. In addition to these woes, corruption runs rampant and officials loot the national coffers with abandon. It is hard to imagine that Nigeria, an oil-rich country with a landmass nearly three times the size of Malaysia and a population five times greater, was once economically on a par with Malaysia. In the 1960s it was even tipped to emerge as an African 'tiger', just as several Asian countries have since transformed themselves into powerful economic 'dragons'. Today, Nigeria languishes at the bottom end of the World Bank's Gross National Income (PPP-GNI/cap) list, ranking a lowly 195 out of 208 countries.[7]

Why has Nigeria failed to "astonish the world with its will and capacities?"[8] How it is possible that "a nation favoured by Providence"[9] with a rich abundance of natural resources and the best of talents could be so destitute after more than four decades of independence? In William Graf's contention, breakdowns in Nigeria's political system have "always occurred within the

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[3] Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent.*

[4] Eghosa E Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1998).

[5] Olusegun Obasanjo, "Inaugural Speech by His Excellency, President Olusegun Obasanjo following his Swearing-in as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 29 May 1999," <http://naijaspace.com/publications/inaugural.html>, accessed 1 June 1999.

[6] Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 9.

[7] "GNI per capita 2002, Atlas method and PPP," *World Bank*, <http://www.world bank.org/ data/databytopic/GNIPC.pdf>, accessed 14 November 2003. PPP-GNI/cap refers to gross national income converted to international dollars using purchasing power parity rates. Malaysia is ranked 81, Bermuda and Luxembourg are ranked first and second respectively, and Sierra Leone ranks last.

[8] Ben Okri, "The Catastrophe Now Facing Nigeria," *Guardian* (London; 6 September 1994).

[9] Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 9.

context of inter-ethnic controversy."[10] Larry Diamond concurs, arguing that "nothing can be understood about Nigeria until its pattern of ethnic diversity is delineated."[11] Eghosa Osaghae too places a similar accent on ethnicity, adding that "for most Africans, the ethnic community is the only real entity worth dying for."[12] There is certainly merit in this line of argument, for although Nigeria is not the only country bedevilled by interethnic tensions, it has to create, like few other countries, a cohesive unit out of an estimated two hundred and fifty to six hundred and nineteen ethno-linguistic groups living within its borders. The exact figure is unknown but it is generally agreed that the largest ethnic minorities (Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio and Tiv) make up more than a third of Nigeria's population, while three ethnic majorities predominate in their core regions: the Hausa-Fulani in the North; and the Yoruba and the Igbo[13] in the South, respectively in the (South)West and the (South)East.

In order to understand the extent of Nigeria's challenge, it is worth recalling that the Hausa-Fulani-dominated North has been an Islamist enclave since at least the fifteenth century. By virtue of its proximity to the Sahara trade routes, it has been influenced predominantly by the Muslim-Sudanic culture which was brought to the region by traders, preachers and itinerant scholars. Over the centuries, Islam continued to spread throughout the region, converting both the elites and the masses, and forging trans-ethnic Muslim solidarity. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Islam was reinvigorated when Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani preacher, and his followers launched a *jihad* to stamp out ancestral paganism and to restore, spread and consolidate Islam. The North was largely unmolested by British colonialists of the early twentieth century, who regarded its indigenous politico-religious institutions more as an expedient tool for the colonial enterprise than as a liability to be wiped out. Northern identity has traditionally revolved around the Hausa, whose prestigious status has drawn smaller ethnic groups in the region to identify with it for the status it confers. Due to its limited contact with Europe, Northern society is hierarchical and hedged in by religious and traditional rules. Its leaders discourage integration with outsiders, whether through marriage or in residential arrangement. By contrast, the South is less stratified, more liberal

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[10] William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: Political Economy, State Class and Political Systems in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: James Currey, 1988): 13.

[11] Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria: The Failure of the First Republic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988): 21.

[12] Eghosa E. Osaghae, "A Re-examination of the Conception of Ethnicity in Africa as an Ideology of Inter-Elite Competition," *African Monograph Series* 12.1 (1991): 53.

[13] Igbo is sometimes spelled as Ibo or Ndiigbo.

and developed, and was considered more receptive to the kind of social change needed for integration into the colonial-capitalist economy. Geographically, it is made up largely of coastal rainforests and swampy plains. These natural barriers have historically inhibited intermingling between ethnic groups and impeded the spread of Islam from the North. The South's proximity to the coast had, however, facilitated early contact with Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, resulting in its intensive evangelization. Today Christianity is still preponderant in the South, especially Igboland in the East. Yorubaland in the West has an even mixture of Christians and Muslims.

Nigeria's ethnoregional cleavage is popularly described as a North–South divide – of the South fearing the eternal domination of the North, and of the North fearing the secret domination of the South, to paraphrase Okri.[14] The use of this shorthand does not presuppose that the regions are closed, homogeneous blocs. In the North, where the Hausa-Fulani dominate, there are also splits within the ranks, as well as resistance to Hausa-Fulani hegemony by other Northerners, such as the Tiv. In the South, there is considerable rivalry between the Yoruba and the Igbo over jobs and positions of power. In fact, a segment of the Igbo community still harbours resentment and feels bitterness towards the Yoruba for their failure to support the Igbo cause during the Biafran civil war. In addition, Igbo dominance in the East is resisted by minority groups like the Ijaw and the Ibibio.

Against those who take ethnicity as the main determinant of Nigerian politics, another group of scholars argue that, in reality, many Nigerians today no longer view government policies, actions and the motives behind them through the lens of ethnicity. According to scholars like Pat Williams, Toyin Falola, and Iheanyi Enwerem, religion has replaced ethnicity as the great divider, despite general reluctance and even refusal on the part of some scholars and non-scholars alike to acknowledge this.[15] Of course, they argue, religion (which imperfectly splits Nigeria along ethnoregional lines and between the

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[14] Ben Okri, "The Catastrophe Now Facing Nigeria," *Guardian* (**6** September **1994**).

[15] See, for example, Iheanyi M. Enwerem, *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria* (Ibadan: IFRA, University of Ibadan, **1995**); Pat Williams & Toyin Falola, *Religious Impact on the Nation State: The Nigerian Predicament* (Aldershot & Brookfield VA: Ashgate, **1995**); Pat Ama Tokunbo Williams, "Religion, Violence and Displacement in Nigeria," in *Displacement and the Politics of Violence in Nigeria*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy & Pat A.T. Williams (Leiden, New York & Cologne: E.J. Brill, **1997**); and Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester NY: U of Rochester P, **1998**).

North and the South) has always been an important political factor in Nigeria. Nigerian history is littered with cases of religious conflict between adherents of Islam and Christianity, as well as with evidence of what William Miles calls "para-theology: the use of religious language, symbolism or imagery by lay leaders or clerics principally for purposes of gaining or maintaining power."[16] However, according to the aforementioned scholars, circumstances have since changed to such an extent that it is no longer realistic to subsume religious politics under ethnic politics. Although ethnicity remains a central issue, the frequency, ferocity and destructiveness of religious riots and clashes between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria since the 1980s have produced new realities which can no longer be adequately grasped solely through the ethnic framework.

The current wave of inter-religious conflict in Nigeria can be traced to the acrimonious Sharia[17] debate in the late 1970s. Muslim representatives of the Constituent Assembly, who were mostly from the North, had then proposed the setting-up of a Federal Court of Sharia. The proposal was scotched, but the Muslim objective of creating an Islamic theocratic order in Nigeria was not extinguished. By the early 1980s, it resurged in a series of uprisings by a pseudo-Muslim fanatical sect called the Maitatsine ('he who curses others' in Hausa), whose aim was to reform Islam and cleanse it of 'un-Islamic' accretions in 'polluted' Nigeria. The official death-toll from the riots was over four thousand, but unofficial sources estimated at least ten thousand, with more than a hundred thousand injured or displaced. The Maitatsine riots were quickly followed by more riots between Muslims and Christians, which caused more death and the destruction of hundreds of churches, mosques and other properties in several federated states: Kano (1982, 1991, 1995), Kaduna (1987, 1992, 2000, 2002), Katsina (1991), Bauchi (1991, 1994, 2000), Plateau (1994, 2001), Bornu (1998), and Yobe (2004).[18] The list is not exhaustive and does not include incidents of ethnic and other politically related violence in Lagos, Taraba, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Benue, and other parts of Nigeria. It might not tell us whether religion has displaced or replaced ethnicity as the driving force of Nigerian politics, or whether religion has "merely reinfor-

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[16] William Miles, "Muslim Ethnopolitics and Presidential Elections in Nigeria," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20.2 (2000): 234.

[17] Sharia is sometimes spelt as Shari'a, Shariah or Shari'ah.

[18] For an account of some of these religious riots, see, for example, Jan H. Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood 1980–2002* (Belleville ON: Essence, 2003), and the various reports issued by Human Rights Watch, <www.hrw.org>.

ced elements of ethnic antagonisms," as Ibrahim Gambari believes.[19] But it is clear that religion can no longer be dismissed as a private matter of faith or as something which would fizzle out the public sphere if ignored, as President Obasanjo once erroneously thought.[20]

The rise of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria implicates not only Muslims but also Christians. Over a thousand Christian sects and movements have surfaced in recent times, some driven by extremist ideologies and the conviction that Jesus is the Answer to Nigeria's socio-economic problems. Fundamentalist or otherwise, some Christians and Muslims tend to blame each other for their country's woes (while a group of adherents of traditional religions point the finger at the theological dogmatism and political conservatism of both Islam and Christianity). The key difference between Muslim and Christian fundamentalists, however, is that Muslim 'neo-jihadists' have been relatively successful in pushing for the islamicization of the country. By exploiting the loopholes in the federal constitution, they have thus far transformed twelve of Nigeria's thirty-six federated states into Sharia states. The desire for Sharia is not confined to the Northern states. Although it has been said that there is a North–South divide between Nigerian Muslims, and that Northern Muslims (Hausa-Fulani and assimilated minorities) practice a 'purer' version of the faith and question the religious integrity of their Southern (mostly Yoruba) co-religionists, the Southern Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) has stated unequivocally that Southern Muslims are in full support of Sharia and that to deny them their fundamental human right to practise their religion in full and without dictation would be an act of oppression and injustice. The SCIA warns outside parties – in particular Christians, non-Muslims, and a section of the Nigerian media which supports Christians and positions itself against Islamists – not to interfere with Sharia, which is the affair of Muslims and Muslims alone. To interfere, they say, would be to incite a religious war.

The demand for Sharia is widely seen by many Southerners and Christians as a cynical ploy by the North and Muslims to extend their hegemony, although it would be more accurate to say that Sharia is employed as much as a political tool as it is out of religious fervour. But as in cases where race is used to dominate others *and* out of the conviction that one's race should receive

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[19] Ibrahim Gambari, "The Role of Religion in National Life: Reflections on Recent Experiences in Nigeria," in *Religion and National Integration in Africa: Islam, Christianity and Politics in the Sudan and Nigeria*, ed. John O. Hunswick (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1992): 88.

[20] Douglas Farah, "Islamic Law Splits Nigeria," *Washington Post* (31 August 2002): 24.

preferential treatment because it had been wronged in the past, exposing the practice as such would be difficult. This is particularly so when the demand for Sharia is couched in the language of human rights and selfless obedience to God. For the moment, when those opposed to the sacralization of the state speak about the importance of preserving the secular character of the country, they stand accused by Islamists of being anti-Islam, anti-North, and undemocratic inciters of a religious war. This, despite the well-known fact that those who have borne the full brunt of Sharia (which allows for "cruel, inhuman and degrading" punishments such as stoning, flogging and amputation[21]) are not the politically connected and the embezzlers of public funds, but the socially disadvantaged, including the poor, the poorly educated, and women.

The Sharia issue has bitterly divided the nation and set off a constitutional crisis. Some observers see a full-blown religious war looming, a war believed to be currently averted or forestalled only by behind-the-scene efforts of concerned individuals, intellectuals, government officials, and other parties. To say that this is alarmist or war-mongering talk, or that Nigeria is the only country in the world where the best is impossible and the worst never happens, does not detract from the fact that Nigeria is at a dangerous impasse and could well spiral into deeper chaos, if not plunge towards disintegration should the crisis get out of control. It remains to be seen if it is at all possible to harmonize the Muslim demand for the right to institutionalize Sharia with the secularist insistence on the separation of religion and the state. The prospect seems bleak as it stands; for, as Muhammad Sani Umar notes, while secularists see Islam as an obstacle to national integration, pro-Sharia Muslims see the Nigerian national state as a barrier to the propagation and 'correct' practice of Islam.[22]

Insecurity-Dilemma

Southern fear of Northern domination is not unfounded, even though leaders from the North have denied harbouring any ambition to dominate. "All of us

[21] "BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights and Amnesty International Joint Statement on the Implementation of New Sharia-based Penal Codes in Northern Nigeria," *Amnesty International* (25 March 2002), <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/eng AFR440082002>, accessed 31 March 2004.

[22] Muhammad Sani Umar, "Islam in Nigeria: Its Concept, Manifestation and Role in Nation-Building," in *Nigeria Since Independence: The First 25 Years*, vol. IX: *Religion*, ed. J.A. Atanda, Garba Ashiwaju & Yaya Abubakar (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1989): 71.

need one another," says Alhaji Maitama Sule, a prominent elite Northern power-broker from Kano.[23] According to him,

> Every one has a gift from God. The Northerners are endowed by God with leadership qualities. The Yoruba man knows how to earn a living and has diplomatic qualities. The Igbo is gifted in commerce, trade and technological innovation. God so created us individually for a purpose and with different gifts.[24]

Maitama Sule believes that Nigeria "will definitely become a great nation, a great influence in the world" if each group were to keep to its rightful place.[25] What he is saying indirectly, in other words, is that Northern (Hausa-Fulani) hegemony is justified, not because Northerners covet power but because they were created by God to rule. At times when God is not invoked, the North would argue that, since the South holds economic power, it is only just that the former should retain political power. But the North is here disingenuously silent on two points: first, that "the control of political power is also the surest means of gaining economic power;" and second, that the South might not actually be in control of the economic power they are said to possess.[26] Maitama Sule's logic of domination bears an uncanny similarity to the reasoning put forward by racist Malay-Muslims in Malaysia. To cite an example: Abdullah Ahmad, then a member of parliament from the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO),[27] insists that the Malay race has the birthright to be "politically dominant" in Malaysia, not because it is unreasonable or racist, but because the country belongs to the Malays, the 'original inhabitants' of the land.[28] That, he says, is how things are and must continue to be, because the Malays would rather share poverty with Indonesia (their co-religionists and

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[23] Cited in J.A.A. Ayoade, *Nigeria and the Squandering of Hope* (Ibadan: U of Ibadan, 1997): 14. Alhaji Maitama Sule was one of the founders of Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa, an organization upon which the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was based.

[24] Ayoade, *Nigeria and the Squandering of Hope*, 14.

[25] *Nigeria and the Squandering of Hope*, 14.

[26] Wole Soyinka, "Redesigning a Nation (text of a public lecture at the Nigerian Law School, Lagos on 16 October 1998)," <http://www.kilima.com/nigeria/soyinka.html>, accessed 30 November 1999.

[27] The UMNO is a Malay-Muslim political party and the dominant party in Barisan Nasional, Malaysia's ruling coalition.

[28] Abdullah Ahmad, "Speech delivered at the Institute of International Affairs, Singapore, 30 August 1986," in *Malay Dominance? The Abdullah Rubric*, comp. & intro. K. Das (Kuala Lumpur: K. Das Ink, 1987): 3.

brothers from the same 'racial pool') than see their political position eroded by non-Malays.

As is clear, structural relations of inequality and domination are hybrid formations in which ethnicity, culture, religion, class and so on intersect, overlap, combine, shape and strengthen each other. They produce an overarching epistemological effect that naturalizes differences between social groups as racial, hence essential and unbridgeable. The underlying claim of racially deterministic discourse is always the same, regardless of the terms in which it is couched: we are our race, born as fixed actors with naturally pre-established traditions, culture, religion, goals and arch-enemies. In order to work, racial essentialism must paper over the irreconcilable gap between subject-position and structural position. It must cover up the fact that 'who we are' is not predetermined by nature or God. A Hausa-Fulani male, for instance, can always view the world from any number of fantasmatic frameworks: radical pan-Africanist, right-wing socialist, anti-Igbo nationalist, self-hating racist, and so on. Should he experience his commitment to an ideological cause from, say, a pan-Africanist perspective, it would be unlikely for him to support the marginalization of his 'natural' enemy: namely, the Igbo.

As we know, fear and hatred of the Other need not arise from any real threat. Sometimes the mere existence of group distinction is enough to give rise to intergroup animosity. In an unstable country, one group's demand for what it regards as equitable treatment (on grounds of real and/or imagined wrongs it has suffered) is likely to heighten fear in other groups whose sense of security is already threatened. In Nigeria, the mutual fear and suspicion between ethnic groups can quickly escalate into violent confrontations which are disproportionately excessive in relation to their cause. Take, as illustration, a small altercation between Christians and Muslims at the College of Education in Kafanchan in **1987**. A Christian speaker who had converted from Islam was accused of misinterpreting Islam and abusing the Prophet Muhammad in his talk, which made reference to two passages from the Quran. A female Muslim student stood up, seized the microphone, and urged the Muslim boys in the hall to take up arms and fight for Islam. The school officials intervened but failed to prevent the Muslims in attendance from assaulting the Christians. Soon the violence spread to other parts of the city and spilled over to other northern towns and cities, including Kaduna, Zaria, Daura, Funtua and Katsina. In the final count, an estimated five mosques and over a hundred and fifty churches were razed, along with scores of private houses, vehicles, hotels, shops and offices.

Alan Collins argues that, in a security-dilemma, "uncertainty [about the other's intent] can lead to the pursuit of actions which are paradoxical because they make matters worse."[29] He proposes that mitigation and ultimately escape from an ethnic security-dilemma lie in power-sharing and ethnic reconstruction. Power-sharing can take the form of a coalition regime, while ethnic reconstruction can involve non-assimilatory identification with a 'neutral' concept like *Bangsa Malaysia* (the 'Malaysian race' transcending race and religion). Power-sharing and benevolent ethnic reconstruction are certainly options worth looking into, but we should also realize that solutions often become problems which require new solutions. A solution can turn into a problem when there are conflicting views on what constitutes neutrality where the construction of 'national race' is concerned, or when there is disagreement on how power ought to be aggregated between competing groups. Nigeria's perennial census-crisis is an example of how solution and problem can coincide. Attempts at counting Nigeria's population have always been rife with controversy because of the enormous implications of census results on the country's balance of power. Because revenue, resources and federal parliamentary seats are allocated in proportion to ethnoregional population-size, numerical superiority literally translates into control of the country. So important are numbers, in fact, that the dead, the unborn, the nonexistent and livestock were reportedly counted to inflate census figures. From the South's perspective, Nigeria's census exercises of 1962 and 1963 were opportunities to remove the numerical basis of Northern domination. More precisely, it was to undo Britain's colonial engineering, which grossly inflated figures from the 1952-53 census in favour of the North. The plan failed, and the North was again declared officially more populous. Howls of protests came loudest from Eastern Premier Michael Okpara, who rejected the "WORSE THAN USELESS" census outcome, claiming that the Northern count was riddled with flagrant malpractices.[30] Legal attempts to nullify the results failed and the case was subsequently closed. Meanwhile, North–South relations continued to fester. By the decade's end, it erupted in a series of military coups and counter-coups, and in a bitter civil war which claimed over a million lives and dispossessed an estimated two to three million.

As we have seen, a security dilemma is akin to self-fulfilling prophecy: 'I fear the worst and try to avoid it. But in avoiding it I inadvertently set in mo-

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[29] Alan Collins, "The Ethnic Security Dilemma: Evidence from Malaysia," in *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20.3 (1998): 263.

[30] Cited in Arthur Agwunchu Nwankwo & Samuel Udochukwu Ifejika, *Biafra: The Making of a Nation* (London: C. Hurst, 1969): 50.

tion a chain of events which culminates in the realization of what I most fear'. Collins suggests that one way of escaping this is to mitigate information failure between the parties.[31] "In the case of power-sharing, if ethnic elites adhere to an agreement where each group has influence over government policy then their uncertainty about the intent that lies behind that policy is, at worst, minimized, and at best, removed." The principle of charity Collins espouses is certainly appealing to our sense of fair play, but it remains problematic, for it overlooks the inherent distortion of communication. Communication ultimately fails, and it is precisely because of this that we are compelled to talk all the time, for if we could say what we want to say directly and accurately, we would already have said it and moved on to become as close-lipped as clams. So instead of certainty, we are faced daily with the persistent gap between utterance and its enunciation: "You're telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?"[32] Without always being conscious of it, we presume that there is something behind everything. We mistake signs for wonders, read into every utterance and gesture some secret meaning, and interpret contingent accidents as confirmations of our paranoiac forebodings. Žižek's example of the anti-Semite German and his Jewish neighbour is useful in illustrating the impossibility of transparent communication. The German, instead of giving up his racist belief when presented with evidence of his neighbour's normality (that is, his failure to act like the schemer and wire-puller that Jews are reputed to be), perversely inverts it into support of his antisemitism:

> "You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind the mask of everyday appearance – and it is exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature."[33]

By the same logic, an apparently neutral political discourse can be compelling not just for what it says, but also because of its concealed responses to our hidden desires. A hypothetical Yoruba (or Hausa-Fulani, Ijaw, and other non-Igbo) might support Nigeria's 'three Rs' plan, which was introduced after Nigeria's civil war (or Northern-led genocide of Igbo, as Biafrans view it) to reconstruct, rehabilitate and reconciliate the country. Publicly, he might declare that there is no victor or vanquished in a war of brothers (to borrow the

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[31] Collins, "The Ethnic Security Dilemma," **269**.

[32] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **111**.

[33] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **49**.

official line used by the Gowon regime which initiated the plan), and that although Easterners should not have attempted to secede from the federation and bring chaos to the country, the war is over and everyone should now put the past behind and work towards the preservation of Nigeria's territorial integrity. Secretly, however, it is not impossible for the hypothetical subject to be motivated by tribalist resentment and envy of the Igbo East for daring to seek enjoyment-existence as a separate, sovereign entity, an ambition which he perhaps harbours for his own 'race' and ethnoregion? Perhaps he feels that by placating and simultaneously locking the Easterners in the federation, they would be assured of never having access to what he too is deprived of.

Locust-Leaders

Apart from ethnicity and religion, another often-cited contributing factor to Nigeria's nationhood dilemma is the failure of its leaders, a prime target in Okri's novels, as we shall see in Part II. The African slave trade would not have been so successful if local rulers had not readily sold their own people to the Europeans. Similarly, colonialism would not have reached its depth of penetration without the support of local elites, including the Northern emirs who, according to Aminu Kano, were "not concerned with anybody or whatever may befall anybody," except for their own children and property.[34] Also, Nigeria would not have faced so much hardship if not for its post-independence military dictators. Between 1984 and 1999 alone, its military regimes promulgated no fewer than fifty-six decrees which flagrantly violated basic human rights.[35] If there had been any doubt about Nigerian ruling elites' propensity for destruction, it would have been dispelled by General Sani Abacha, who came to power after the annulment of the 1993 election result. Abacha's ruthlessness was "unique even by Nigeria's standards of brutal military dictatorship."[36] Even before seizing power, the "first real dictator Nigeria has

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[34] Aminu Kano, tr. from Hausa by John N. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: U of California P, 1973): 281. Aminu Kano was a co-founder of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), a political party which challenged the hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern People's Congress (NPC).

[35] Some of the more notorious: State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 of 1984 which allows the Government to detain, without charge or trial, any person suspected of acts prejudicial to the security of the state or the economy; and Offensive Publication (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993, empowering the Head of State to seal off or seize any publication or publishing house considered hostile to the administration.

[36] Adebayo Williams, "Reinventing Nigeria," *Africa Today* (July 1998): 8.

known"[37] ordered his soldiers to mow down at least four hundred unarmed demonstrators protesting against the election annulment. His more illustrious victims include Ken Saro–Wiwa and Kudirat Abiola, wife of the 1993 President-elect, Basarun Abiola, who was gunned down in broad daylight in Lagos. When Abacha died suddenly of a cardiac arrest (reportedly in the arms of Indian prostitutes), ending his five-year rule, which Nigerians call the "years of the locust," his death was celebrated with such morbid jubilation that the people were reported to have taken to the streets with a mock coffin, singing anti-Abacha songs.

After all that Nigeria has been through, it is not surprising that Nigerians should regard the political class as a "desperate and incorrigible lot, a collective of veteran delinquents."[38] For Achebe, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership [...] the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."[39] He writes that Nigerian leaders generally lack the executive foresight and the intellectual rigour for which the like of Julius K. Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah are renowned. What they possess instead is "a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centred pedestrianism."[40] An example is made of Obafemi Awolowo, a former leader from Western Nigeria, who wrote in his autobiography:

> I was going 'to make myself formidable intellectually', 'morally invulnerable', 'to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria'.[41]

Of course, political elites are not the only contributors to Nigeria's troubles; non-elites, too, know very well that the state can be put to their service. They use it to scale the social hierarchy and to gain access to the spoils of elitism: wealth, power, reputation, influence. The shared intimacy between elites and non-elites is well-reflected in prebendal politics, described by Rich-

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[37] Richard Synge, "The Final Year of a Disappearing Dictator," *Africa Today* (July 1998): 14.

[38] Williams, "Reinventing Nigeria," 9.

[39] Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 1.

[40] Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 11.

[41] Obafemi Awolowo, *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1960): 102. In the 1960s, Awo was found guilty by the Coker Commission of misusing Western regional funds. He was indicted for diverting public funds totalling N4.4 million in cash and N1.3 million in overdraft to finance the Action Group (the dominant Western political party around the time of independence).

ard Joseph as "patterns of political behaviour which rest on the justifying principle that offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as for their […] support group."[42] Prebendalism is almost always mentioned in the same breath with another national bane: clientelism or patron–client instrumental friendship in which the patron uses his influence and resources to "provide protection or benefits or both, for his lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron."[43] As a system of reward, prebendalism and clientelism feed on intergroup rivalry. The more insecure a group feels, the more it tends to subscribe to the system. Opting out is an option, but it would not be easy, since refusal to play the game effectively means forgoing the benefits of being under the protection of an *oga* ('godfather'), such as access to loans, scholarships, licences, land, employment, and promotions. Furthermore, the repercussions are not only the individual's to face, they also affect his kinsmen or dependants, because one's personal fate hinges to a considerable extent on the political fortune of the group(s) to which one is affiliated. In our discussion of Okri in Part II, we will see how ruinous it can be to have the wrong affiliations.

From Independence to War

By **1951**, Nigeria was already well on the road to independence. Its struggle was less a matter of defying colonial authority and more a matter of displaying sufficient unity between the ethnic groups and the continuance in goodwill of that unity to compel a commitment from Britain. The required show of unity was nonetheless a tall order, considering the antagonistic nationhood ideals of the three ethnoregional blocs and the communal character of the dominant political parties in each region. In retrospect, it seems extraordinary that any consensus was reached at all. The North – headed by the Northern People's Congress (NPC) – was from the outset opposed to the Southern demand for early self-government. To the bitter resentment of Western and Eastern leaders – from the Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)[44] respectively – the North had in **1953** refused to commit itself to the target of **1956** for self-government and threatened to

[42] Richard A. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, **1987**): **8**.

[43] James C. Scott, cited in Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*, **57**.

[44] The NCNC was formerly known as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons.

secede if things were to proceed. Fearing Southern domination, the NPC demanded that the date be left indefinite so as to give Northerners time to catch up with Southern progress and development, and to "sit and discuss among themselves what kind of government they wished."[45] What transpired thereafter is now etched in popular memory: frustrated AG and NCNC members staged a parliamentary walk-out. That same evening, NPC politicians were booed and jeered at by the crowd outside the House of Representatives while Southern leaders were cheered. The Southern press began criticizing Northern leaders in hostile terms, labelling them imperialist stooges and kolanut chiefs without minds of their own.[46] The Northerners were highly incensed by the attack, particularly since Hausas were said to regard personal and public humiliation as an offence more grievous than physical assault. Tension escalated and violence erupted in May 1953 when AG politicians visited Kano on a campaign for self-government.

Disturbingly, although the violence was precipitated by the visit of Yoruba politicians, it was directed almost exclusively at the Igbo community. At least thirty-six people lost their lives and over two hundred were wounded. Amidst the political turmoil, the South continued to press for independence in 1956, arguing that even if the move was premature, it was, as a matter of dignity, better for Nigerians to rule themselves badly than for foreigners to rule them well. The North was, however, equally emphatic in rejecting it. The situation was impossibly deadlocked until the NPC unexpectedly changed its position in 1956, announcing that it would seek regional self-government in 1959 (three years after regional self-government in the South). Following further bargaining, it was agreed that 1959 would be the year of destiny, although it was later revised to 1960. On 1 October 1960, Nigeria became the sixteenth sovereign African country.

Before we venture to trace some of the major post-independence developments leading up to Nigeria's devastating civil war in 1967, it should be mentioned that the above account of the country's journey towards independence is neither the only available account nor an account which has gone unchallenged. In Part II we will see that whenever Okri reiterates in the *abiku* novels the view that the nation has been aborted even before its birth, that dirty secret pacts have been made between the colonizer and the colonized, and that this great betrayal would set in motion a chain of catastrophic events that would culminate in the civil war, he is possibly alluding to an 'uncut' version of

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[45] Ahmadu Bello, *My Life*, 121.

[46] Northern Regional Government (Nigeria), *Report on the Kano Disturbances: 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th May, 1953* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1953): 4.

Nigerian history which mainstream accounts appear to have suppressed. We will examine the claims of this alternative account and interrogate the role played by a nefarious new character in *Infinite Riches* who, although referred to only as the Governor-General, bears an uncanny resemblance to the unofficial portrait of Sir James Robertson, the real-life Governor-General of Nigeria who saw the country through independence.

Although the post-independence years between 1960 and 1962 were relatively calm, nothing had really changed "except the colour of the rich man emerging from the back seat of his car."[47] In colloquial terms, Nigerians had only exchanged monkeys for baboons. Against Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's claim that Nigeria was "well-built upon firm foundations,"[48] and instead of materializing the anticipated new social order, independence saw the educated elites – often more tribalistic than the illiterate masses – turning to even more unscrupulous means to appeal to the baser loyalties of their respective ethnic communities. Under Balewa's leadership, the federal and regional governments were embroiled in one plot after the other to weaken their rivals. Amidst increasing political turmoil, the military staged its first coup on 15 January 1966. By the time Nigerians had gathered coherent information about the event, top politicians – including the Northern and Western premiers, the Federal Prime Minister, and a number of top military officers – had been assassinated by the coup-plotters, headed by Major Nzeogwu. The East and Mid-West premiers survived the partly successful coup, the official aim of which was to purge Nigeria of its corrupt internal 'otherness', including tribalists, nepotists, homosexuals, and political profiteers.[49]

Although the military regime was initially praised and supported by ordinary citizens, its intervention soon became a suspected Igbo plot to dominate Nigeria. All the signs suddenly confirmed the conspiracy theory: most of the military personnel assassinated were from Nigeria's North and West while Eastern political leaders were spared; a suspiciously high number of Northerners were dismissed from the air force to make way for Southerners; and the military regime tried to replace federalism with republicanism, a plan read by the Northern elites as an attempt to remove what was and is regarded as a de-

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[47] A.M.H. Kirk–Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook 1966–1969* (London: Oxford UP, 1971): 31.

[48] Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, *Nigeria Speaks: Speeches Made Between 1957 and 1964* (Ikeja, Enugu & Benin: Longmans, 1964): 59. Balewa was a Northerner and Nigeria's first Prime Minister.

[49] See the transcript of Major Nzeogwu's martial law announcement in Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook 1966–1969*, 125–27.

vice to protect ethnoregional differences and to ensure that each segment of the country progresses at its own pace. Following a groundswell of anti-Igbo sentiment, General Gowon and his Northern backers struck back in a revenge counter-coup code-named Operation *Araba* ('Secession Day' in Hausa) in July 1966. What followed was the extermination of an estimated eighty to a hundred thousand Easterners between May and September 1966. Victims were reported to have been sadistically tortured before being slaughtered. Some were reportedly "made to swim in ponds of faeces for several hours before being finally shot."[50]

On account of mounting violence against Easterners outside the East, the military governor of the Eastern region, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, urged Easterners in other parts of Nigeria to return temporarily to the safety of their home region. Tension continued to mount, and in May 1967 the East announced its secession from Nigeria, sparking off the country's civil war. By May 1969, the Republic of Biafra (as the East had named itself) had lost eighty percent of its territory to the federal forces. When the war ended with Biafra's defeat in 1970, over a million people had died from military action, disease, and starvation, making it "one of the worst civil wars in modern African history and the most expensive both in monetary terms and in human waste."[51]

Historical accounts of the civil war are split: did Biafra secede for self-serving reasons or was it forced to break away or perish in a Northern attempt to wipe out the Igbo, an attempt allegedly supported by "fanatic Arab-Muslim states like Algeria, Egypt and the Sudan" which saw Biafra as "a stumbling block" to their plan of islamicizing the entire African continent?[52] Was Ojukwu a hero forced to fight for Igbo survival, or was he a "gangster" and a "decrepit and diminutive Hitler"[53] who suffered from an "unbridled desire for personal power"?[54] The official line is that Biafra's breakaway bid was high treason, an irresponsible attempt to destroy what took years of toil to build. General Olusegun Obasanjo (a divisional commander during the war, currently President of Nigeria) insists that the civil war was not a bloodthirsty

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[50] Nwankwo & Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra*, 159.

[51] J.O. Irukwu, *Nigeria at the Crossroads: A Nation in Transition* (London: Witherby, 1983): 171.

[52] Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, "The Ahiara Declaration: The Principles of the Biafran Revolution, dated June 1, 1969," <http://www.biafraland.com/ahiara_declaration.htm>, accessed 19 January 2004.

[53] *Towards One Nigeria* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1967): 20.

[54] *Towards One Nigeria*, 27.

Muslim holy war against "the victimised children of the Pope."[55] Biafra, he argues, was not the "Israel of Africa" portrayed by influential American Jews. By the federal government's anti-secessionist logic, Nigeria's unity was non-negotiable and Igbo should "once and for all renounce tribal domination and escape from their persecution complex."[56] Igbo were further urged to stop harping on "the golden age which they never had" and to learn to share with other Nigerians instead of monopolizing public offices and trade.[57]

It may well be true, as John de St. Jorre argues, that the Biafran leadership had "gone too far and was failing in the moral responsibility […] to guide its people away from the course of heroic but suicidal sacrifice on which Biafra was set."[58] Those on the side of Biafra, however, maintain that secession was the only alternative to the prospect of being killed in a Northern-sponsored ethnic-cleansing mission disguised as a one-Nigeria nationalist project. According to Nwankwo and Ifejika, it did not matter whether Biafrans supported or rejected the notion of a unitary Nigerian destiny, since they had been singled out for extermination: "you were qualified for death so long as you were a Biafran."[59] The Biafran claim is given credence by Chinua Achebe, who was forced to flee from his Lagos home to escape the anti-Igbo pogrom during the civil war. In an interview he gave in 1968, Achebe says that the real issue is not who started this or that, or whether the Igbo had it coming, but that the Igbo have been rejected and "persecuted […] on a scale that is almost unbelievable."[60] Achebe is convinced that the civil war was not about the rest of Nigeria genuinely wanting the Igbo back in the federation. "This talk of integration," he says, is "nonsense" and merely "eyewash" which covers up "so much bitterness on both sides."[61] Nor was the civil war simply about the huge oil reserves beneath Biafra – oil said to be so pure "you can run Biafran crude straight into a diesel lorry and it will work"[62] – coveted by the rest of Nigeria, including the poorer, agricultural North. According to Achebe, what the North will not admit to the press was "the sheer desire to

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[55] Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970* (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981): 147.

[56] African Statesmen, *Towards a New Nigeria* (Lagos: Committee of Ten, 1969): 5.

[57] *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1967): 270.

[58] John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972): 18.

[59] Nwankwo & Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra*, 270.

[60] Chinua Achebe, "Chinua Achebe on Biafra," *Transition* 36 (1968): 32.

[61] Achebe, "Chinua Achebe on Biafra," 32.

[62] Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (1969; Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001): 105–106.

complete the revenge" on the Igbo, to teach them a lesson for having made visible progress in acquiring wealth, education and so on:

> My own feeling is that there is something nasty in human nature. Perhaps not just human, but also in animal nature, to reduce people to more or less the same level. [Once] you begin to get too tall or too important, there is always this desire to cut off the head. I think it is simply that. Students in the North had their fingers chopped off – Biafran students, – by the Northerners, who said, "You people know too much", – they want to reduce this disparity. I think there is a nasty strain in human nature.[63]

Officially, allegations of genocide were rejected in reports submitted by a team of observers from the United Nations, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), and countries like Britain, Poland, Sweden and the USA. Biafrans, however, dispute the findings, arguing that the delegates had been deceived by scenes staged for their consumption, such as Nigerian soldiers feeding and acting kindly towards Biafran civilians. Contrary to the official line which proclaimed that there was neither victor nor vanquished in a war of brothers, those on the side of Biafra, including Dubem Okafor, maintain that "the war had a definite victor [North] and an acknowledged vanquished [East]."[64] The vanquished continued to be punished. First the Biafran currency was voided, which made paupers of most Biafrans. Then there was the deliberate economic and developmental neglect of certain Biafran territories and the systematic political and economic dispossession of Easterners through official policies such as the Indigenisation Decree and the Abandoned Properties Decree.[65] More than three decades have passed since the civil war ended, but coalitions of Igbo in Nigeria and abroad continue to press for charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity to be brought against the perpetrators of what they insist was a genocide of Biafrans.

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[63] Achebe, "Chinua Achebe on Biafra," 33.

[64] Dubem Okafor, The *Dance of Death: Nigerian History and Christopher Okigbo's Poetry* (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998): 38.

[65] The Igboezue Cultural Association claims that Igbos have been unfairly sidelined from occupying important ministerial positions in Defence, Internal Affairs, Agriculture, Works and Housing, Mines and Power, Transport [and Water] Resources. They further charge that "for over 100 years of the existence of [the] Board of Customs and Excise, no Igbo person has been considered qualified to head the strategic parastatal." See Ben Eguzozie, "Obasanjo Urged to End Igbo Marginalisation," *PM News* (Lagos; 5 March 1999).

MALAYSIA

Introduction

In 2003 the Malaysian government launched its first Astronaut Programme and invited interested Malaysian citizens to apply to become the first Malaysian to be launched into space on board Russia's *Soyuz*. Not unexpectedly, the official announcement was quickly followed by a racist joke that was widely circulated on the internet. The joke goes like this: after an exhaustive search, three potential astronauts are shortlisted. The interviewer is Dr Mahathir Mohammad (Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister, who retired in 2003) and the first interviewee is an Indian Malaysian. "So, Muthu, this is a dangerous mission. How much do you think you ought to be paid for it?" Mahathir asks. Muthu replies, "One million ringgit." "Why so much?" asks Mahathir. "Nowadays, sir, toddy is very expensive," says Muthu. "I see," said Mahathir. "Thank you, you may leave now. Please ask the Malay candidate to come in." The Malay comes in and is asked the same question, to which he replies, "Uh, two million." "Two million? That's a lot of money!" "You see," explains Mat, the Malay, "I have four wives and fifteen children. In all there are twenty of us in the family and we need a lot of money to support ourselves. Besides, we Malays must take care of each other." "I see," says Mahathir. "Okay, can you ask the Chinese guy to come in now?" The Chinese candidate comes in and Mahathir asks, "Ah Chong, this is a dangerous mission. How much do you think you should be paid?" Without hesitation Ah Chong says, "Three million." Mahathir is shocked. "What?! Three million? Why so much?" Ah Chong beckons Mahathir to come closer, and whispers, "One million you keep, one million I keep, and one million we use to send the *aneh* [Indian] into space."

Malaysians and those familiar with Malaysian politics would immediately recognize that the joke is structured around a die-hard fantasy about the three majority 'races' of Malaysia: the Indian (typified as a dispensable, toddy-loving labourer), the Malay (polygamous, race-obsessed, rent-seeking Muslim), and the Chinese (shrewd and treacherous businessman). What is interesting about these stereotypes is that, although they do not faithfully reflect contemporary Malaysian society, they have lost little of their racist appeal. This is unsurprising, for race is intuitively understood by the average Malaysian and articulated by the state as something immutable, objectively measurable, and biologically heritable. Despite being no more real than phlogiston, a slippery term which cannot be defined in any consistent sense, much less scientifically, or perhaps *because* of that, race is used as a master-index of inclusion and exclusion in the sociopolitical sphere. With varying degrees of subtlety, it is employed to distinguish the 'core' population of Malays from the 'surplus'

population of non-Malays: that is, the Chinese, Indians, and other non-Malay indigenes. (In Malaysia, all Malays are Muslims by the definition of the Federal Constitution, while the majority of non-Malay Malaysians profess non-Muslim faiths, mainly Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and traditional religions). Politically speaking, race works for the Malays; by invoking it, they have, to use poet-lawyer Cecil Rajendra's 'seditious' words, successfully

> implemented a quota system
> to reserve places for their children
> in school, college & university;
>
> stuffed ranks of Police & Army
> with officers of their nomination
> to protect their pockets & property;
>
> and legislated that any question
> of their special powers & position
> would invite a charge of treason.[66]

If Malaysia's nationhood ideal is symbolized by '*Bangsa* Malaysia', a new Malaysian society 'eraced' of race and racism, then the impediment, from the standpoint of the non-Malays, lies in the Malay insistence that the Malay race has the special birthright to be politically dominant in the country, and that Malay culture, its norms, rules and practices, institutions, language, literary and architectural forms, must be valorized above the cultures of the non-Malays. Interestingly enough, from a dominant Malay perspective, there is nothing racist or unethical about this. The standard claim is that the Malays are the rightful owners of Malaysia because they inhabited the land long before the influx of Chinese and Indian migrants to Malaya between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the argument goes, because the Malays (as *bumiputras*[67] or 'princes/sons of the soil') have had their racial dignity trampled on by colonialists since the sixteenth century (beginning with the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese in **1511**), it is only right that they should, upon attainment of national independence, regain full

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[66] Cecil Rajendra, "Kingdom of Purplaya," *Aliran Monthly* **21.1** (**2001**): **20**.

[67] The aboriginal peoples of Malaysia are *bumiputras* whose indigenous status antedates all other ethnic communities, including the Malays. But their welfare is generally neglected by the Malay-dominated government. For a discussion of this, see Gordon P. Means, "The Orang Asli: Aboriginal Policies in Malaysia," *Pacific Affairs* **58.4** (**1985–86**).

ownership of the land they had lost and institutionalize the Malay race as the centre around which Malaysia turns.

Critics opposed to Malay hegemony as a matter of birthright argue that although these claims may elicit sympathy, they are actually premissed upon a misreading of historical evidence and underpinned by principles which contradict the rules of fair play and the spirit of national togetherness. They agree unconditionally that the relative socio-economic backwardness of a section of the heterogeneous Malay community must be redressed, just as the socio-economic backwardness of non-Malay communities must be rectified, if an equitable society is to be created. That, they point out, does not mean that Malay special rights are eternal or that the existence of these rights may be taken as proof of Malay superiority. As is explicitly stated in the Constitutional Commission Report of **1957**, the special privileges legislated for the Malays are only to help them achieve equal footing with other communities – privileges that are temporary and should in due course "be reduced and should ultimately cease so that there should then be no discrimination between races or communities."[68]

Before the Beginning of Melaka

To unravel these issues and at the same time to shed light on what is at stake in Maniam's writings, let us now turn to Melaka, a fifteenth-century kingdom constructed by the Malay-dominated state as the zero-level of Malaysian history and a legitimizer of the Malay claim to political superiority in contemporary Malaysia. Melaka is believed to have been founded by Parameswara,[69] a fugitive prince expelled from Palembang for treason against the Majapahit ruler. Situated where the state of Melaka is today, the old Melaka, with China as its overlord, quickly rose to fame and prosperity as a cosmopolitan entrepôt state in the fifteenth century. The spread of Islam to the region and its adoption as the state religion by Melaka during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah (**1446**–**59**) further enhanced the kingdom's power and prestige. Melaka lasted about a hundred years before it was invaded and captured by the Portuguese in **1511**. It was not until **1957**, after going through the hands of British, Japa-

[68] Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Report of the Federation of Malay Constitutional Commission* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, **1957**): **72**.

[69] Parameśvara is a Sanskrit appellation of the Hindu god Siva. Parameswara is believed to have fled to Singapore, killed its ruler and ruled for several years, before fleeing again to Melaka to escape a Siamese attack.

nese and British forces again, that Melaka and the other states in Malaysia found independence.

In Malay nationalist discourse and the state-sanctioned history of Malaysia, the centuries prior to Melaka's founding are generally regarded as insignificant. One might argue that the reason for this has less to do with the scarcity or opacity of evidence from the pre-Melakan period, and more to do with the fact that what preceded Melaka was not a prehistorical void but centuries of repressed history, a period when societies in the archipelago were Hindu–Buddhist in spirit and character. It is played down by the state but not unwritten in history books that before Islam was brought to Melaka in the first half of the fifteenth century by Indian-Muslim traders, indianized kingdoms were already firmly established in the region. These include estuarine settlements on both sides of the Straits of Melaka, a grand example of which is Srivijaya, which lasted from the seventh to the thirteenth century. Centred on Palembang, Srivijaya was one of the wealthiest and most prestigious maritime kingdoms of its time, renowned across the world as a centre of knowledge which sponsored religious studies and hosted over a thousand Buddhist monks who came to study Buddhist scriptures. Following Srivijaya's decline, Melaka rose to prominence by following many of the traditions set by its predecessor. China was courted for protection, commercial facilities were made attractive to lure traders away from rival ports, security was prioritized, and the legal-administrative machinery was kept efficient. Melaka's structure of government, too, was borrowed heavily from Srivijaya. Its dynastic rulers stood at the apex of society and at the centre of all meaningful activities. They also gained legitimacy by positioning themselves as sacred descendents of Palembang royalty, whose mythic lineage is traced to Alexander the Great.

In the eyes of Malay nationalists, Melaka is the sacred fount of Malay historical memory. Melaka's sociopolitical structure is regarded as a pillar of traditional Malay culture and statecraft, while its adoption of Islam in the fifteenth century figures as the founding revolutionary moment in the history of what it means to be Malay. This dominant image of Melaka persists despite the fact that Melaka's openness towards Islam had less to do with religious enlightenment than with courtly politics and the desire for power and expansion of trade. It is rarely highlighted, for instance, that Megat Iskandar Shah (the second king of Melaka) used Islam as an instrument for the moral disintegration of the Hindu–Buddhist Javanese empire, Majapahit, which up until then had exercised hegemony in the region. The Malay-centric account of Malaysian history, which puts Melaka at its centre and privileges the Malay agent, may be the only version familiar to ordinary Malaysians, but it has not gone uncontested. To quote but two prominent historians, Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, the early centuries before Melaka were not "merely a

prelude to the great Malay power"[70] and the "story of Malaysia does not [...] begin at Melaka."[71] Melaka is only part of a constructed historical continuum, and not an 'objective' foundation which legitimates *ketuanan Melayu* ('Malay supremacy'). Read against the grain, the severance of early Melaka from what preceded it may be seen as a calculated attempt to overlook the past in its entirety – a past which, given full attention, would expose the contingency of Melaka and Malay power. It was for this reason that laws were passed in Malaysia to criminalize any debate on the political and moral legitimacy of the Malays' 'special status'.

Surplus Population

From the late nineteenth century until the 1930s, colonial Britain actively encouraged mass migration from China and India to Malaya to meet labour demands in the booming tin-mining and rubber plantation sectors. Some migrants responded with the hope of finding a better life. Others took it as an opportunity to flee from political turbulence in their respective homelands. There were also those who were kidnapped, coerced or tricked into coming to the promised land of plenty. Almost all migrants arrived poor, but there were crucial differences between the Chinese and the Indians. The majority of migrants from China arrived as free instead of indentured labourers. This gave them some freedom to move in and out of the different sectors of the economy. Over a generation or two, some who arrived as coolies went on from working in tin-mines to become shopkeepers, contractors, traders, and merchants. Only a small minority achieved wealth, as attested by the fact that intra-ethnic inequality was the highest for the Chinese and the lowest for the Malays in the late 1950s.[72] By 1970, the Chinese elite had come to own twenty-two percent of the nation's equities, while foreign interests owned sixty-percent.

In contrast to the Chinese, the Indian migrants who came to work in rubber plantations in Malaya were structurally crippled from the outset. As captured in Maniam's key writings, they were predominantly unskilled, lowly paid Tamil workers who had to cringe and crawl before their superiors, and were looked upon with contempt as "evil-smelling Hindus," "oily in body, cringing

[70] Barbara Watson Andaya & Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (1982; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2nd ed. 2001): 36–37.

[71] Andaya & Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 7.

[72] Jomo K.S, *Growth and Structural Change in the Malaysian Economy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990): 91.

in demeanour, and maddening in speech."[73] In the plantations where they lived and worked, they were taught by their *kangany* ('foreman') to keep to their 'rightful' place. The *kangany*, usually an Indian labourer of a higher caste, acted not only as the only link between India and the labourers' new world, but also as a feared enforcer of social discipline.[74] The system in which Indian labourers and their families were trapped offered almost no hope for upward socio-economic mobility. Wages were kept at the barest minimum and working conditions were harsh in the malaria and snake-infested plantation zone, popularly seen as "a death trap yawning to engulf the surplus population of India."[75] Indian labourers were generally undernourished, the mortality rate was high, and social problems like domestic violence, crime, alcoholism and destitution in old age were rampant. Even formal education, the standard escape route from poverty, failed to make any significant impact. Instead of imparting meaningful skills, Tamil-medium plantation schools only prepared students for manual jobs, in line with their role as "an agent of social control and meeting the manpower needs of the plantation economy."[76]

The oppression of the Indian community in Malaysia crippled not just the migrant generation but also successive ones. Today the Indian community is one of the most marginalized communities in the country. It is common knowledge that its members form the lowest strata of Malaysian society, the majority of whom hold low-paying, low-status jobs (e.g., garbage collectors, road sweepers, grass cutters, school caretakers).[77] They are stereotyped as toddy-drinking, habitual liars who are furthermore great pretenders lacking in personal cleanliness and susceptible to melodrama.[78] Perhaps the only thing more unfortunate than the Indian community's misfortune is the belief that its

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[73] Frank A. Swettenham, *The Real Malay: Pen Pictures* (London: John Lane, 1900): 37, 40.

[74] Sinnapah Arasaratnam, "Malaysian Indians: The Formation of Incipient Society," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. K.S. Sandhu & A. Mani (Singapore: Times, 1993): 194.

[75] Kernial Singh Sandhu, "The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. K.S. Sandhu & A. Mani (Singapore: ISEAS & Times Academic Press, 1993): 153.

[76] T. Marimuthu, "The Plantation School as an Agent of Social Reproduction," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sandhu & Mani, 465.

[77] For a recent substantial report on the Indian dilemma, see Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute, *Socio-Economic Study of the Indian Community in Penang, Final Report*, vol. 2 (Penang: SERI, 1998).

[78] Khoo Kay Kim, "Malay Attitudes Towards Indians," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sandhu & Mani, 279.

lowly status is the result of predestination when it is largely the result of systematic oppression and neglect.

Real Malay

If Chinese migrants were perceived with horror and envy as clannish money-makers who were able to "suck the honey from every profitable undertaking,"[79] and the Indians stereotyped as disposable, contemptible coolies, the Malays were widely regarded as indolent by nature. As Frank Swettenham, the first Resident-General of the Federated Malay States, put it in **1907**, the "leading characteristic of the Malay of every class is a disinclination from work."[80] Like many colonial administrators in Malaya, Swettenham believed that "the Malay has no stomach for really hard and continuous work, either of the brain or the hands."[81] He attributed this to nature, which provided the Malay with such abundance that, with just a little exertion, he would have enough food to subsist upon for an entire year. Swettenham also reasoned that the tropical climate inclined the Malay to eat, rest and indulge in "dreamy contemplation rather than to strenuous and persistent toil."[82]

The same argument is picked up again more than six decades later by Mahathir Mohamad, who, in his polemical book *The Malay Dilemma* (first published in **1970**), asserts that, for hereditary and environmental reasons, the Malays were unable to compete with the Chinese migrants and had to retreat before their onslaught. Being strong and resourceful, the Chinese had upon their arrival "destroyed the self-reliance of Malays in craftsmanship, skilled work and business."[83] Like Swettenham before him, Mahathir believes that the Malay dilemma has its roots in the easy life the Malays allegedly had in the precolonial land of plenty where in-breeding and polygamy were commonplace. Echoing Frank Swettenham, he writes that

> the hot, humid climate of the land was not conducive to either vigorous work or even to mental activity. Thus, except for a few, people were content to spend their unlimited leisure in merely resting or in extensive conversation with neighbours and friends.[84]

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[79] Swettenham, *The Real Malay: Pen Pictures*, **38**.

[80] Frank A. Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, **1907**): **136**.

[81] Swettenham, *British Malaya*, **137**.

[82] *British Malaya*, **137**.

[83] Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, **1970**): **27**.

[84] Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, **21–22**.

The libidinal investment in the Malay race and the belief that Malays must awake or be swamped by non-Malays was and is not uncommon among Malay-centric Malays like Mahathir Mohamad. Early Malay ideologists including Mohd. Eunos Abdullah, Abdul Rahim Kajai and Ibrahim Yaacob focused their energies on exhorting the Malays to awaken, unite, remember, love and make their race great, powerful and permanent.[85] The same call to duty can be heard as loudly today, for instance, in Mahathir's emotion-choked recitation of his self-penned poem "Melayu Mudah Lupa" ('Malays Forget Easily') before a full house of UMNO delegates during a summit in 2001.

However much one disagrees that the tropical climate encourages lotus-eating and low mental activity in Malays,[86] it cannot be denied that many Malays had suffered much in the past. It is well-known that British colonial policies deliberately sought to keep rural Malays docile and backward by providing them with only the most rudimentary education in their vernacular. English, the prerequisite language for upward social mobility, was excluded from the curriculum because it was felt that to teach the language to the children of an agricultural population would unfit them for the duties of life and make them discontented with manual labour. Except for a handful of fortunate commoners, only sons of Malay aristocrats and traditional elites were privileged with an approximate English public-school education to prepare them for absorption into the 'prestigious' Malay administrative service.

The most significant but often overlooked contributor to the Malay dilemma, however, is not inferior genes, the climate or colonialism *per se*, but the Malay rulers themselves, who socialized their subjects into being 'good Malays' – "always unobtrusive and self-effacing," by Mahathir's definition.[87] Munshi Abdullah,[88] an early nineteenth-century Malay interpreter, translator and language teacher, writes in his journals that the main reason for the Malays' backwardness, for their becoming "more and more stupid," was "the inhumanity and the repressive tyranny of the Malay rulers, especially towards

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[85] For a detailed discussion on the early Malay ideologists, see Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

[86] See Syed Hussein Alatas' response to Mahathir Mohamad's representation of Malay inferiority in his seminal book *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

[87] Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, 160.

[88] Munshi Abdullah was born Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir in Melaka in 1797. Despite his Arab–Indian ancestry, he often regarded himself as Malay.

their own subjects."[89] Instead of fulfilling his role as protector and religious leader of his people, the Malay ruler would customarily "despise his subjects, as though he thought of them as animals."[90] Regarding them as illiterate and unwilling to learn, he forbade them from displaying any originality, acquiring a private identity, wearing shoes, or even lifting their heads and enjoying themselves. Without fear of *Allah*, he would seize any woman he happened to desire, invent charges against his people if it suited him, and take their lives without compunction. Of the common people, Abdullah observes that "not one in ten did any work; the majority of them loafed about all day in poverty and vice."[91] If they did any work, it was to carry their weapons hither and thither; "every one carried four of five javelins and a kris and a cutlass"[92] and never parted with them. Their clothes were stiff with dirt and covered with lice, which they picked off. Their children were left to wallow in dirt, fall about, and get all kinds of skin diseases. Abdullah writes that he is not surprised ordinary Malays prefer to remain poor and miserable; "for if a man does acquire property or a fine house or a plantation or estate of any size, a Raja [ruler] is sure to find some way or other to get hold of it; or he may demand a loan or a gift."[93] Abdullah declares he would never wish to settle in the Malay territories which lay beyond the British settlements: "For a man who is near a Raja is as a man who makes friend with a poisonous snake; if a trifle goes wrong, he gets bitten in the eye."[94]

Aside from highlighting the ways in which ordinary Malays have been taught to inculcate an attitude of thought which does them more harm than good, Munshi Abdullah's journals also reveal a disparity between his racial notion of *bangsa Melayu* (the Malay race, a concept which had yet to prevail during Abdullah's time), and pre-nineteenth-century conceptions of the term. As Anthony Reid writes, in ancient times the term *Melayu* did not designate a

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[89] Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Hikayat Abdullah* (1950; Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1970): 310. Also see Chandra Muzaffar's discussion of the ways in which the Malay commoners' obedience to their feudal ruler has been transferred to the UMNO in "Continuity and Change in Malay Ideas of the Melakan Period," in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital c.1400–1980*, vol. 2 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1983).

[90] Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Hikayat Abdullah*, 310.

[91] Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Voyage of Abdullah: Being an Account of his Experiences on a Voyage from Singapore to Kelantan in AD 1838*, tr. A.E. Coope (1949; Kuala Lumpur, Oxford UP, 1967): 9.

[92] Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Voyage of Abdullah*, 26.

[93] *The Voyage of Abdullah*, 27.

[94] Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *The Voyage of Abdullah*, 71.

people as it does today but was used as a toponym associated with Srivijaya and the surrounding region.[95] In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the term evolved to define a line of kingship acknowledging descent from Srivijaya and Melaka, as well as a minority of subjects from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who had settled in Melaka, who spoke Malay as a first language, and who pledged loyalty to the sultan. The term also referred to a dispersed commercial diaspora which retained some of the customs, language and trade practices of Melaka. Prior to the nineteenth century, there was no Malay ethnie as such. If foreigners perceived distinct elements of Malayness (religion, language, literature, clothing, legal system, political culture), these elements were "more obvious to outsiders than to Malays,"[96] who identified themselves primarily as subjects of their ruler and as members of their dialect group (e.g., Javanese, Sumatran, Rawa, Achenese, Minangkabau, Bugis). It was not until Western racial discourse seeped into the writing of thinkers like Munshi Abdullah and Mohd. Eunos Abdullah that *bangsa Melayu* was invented and gradually gained currency in Malay thought.

British administrators and scholars stationed in Malaya, too, have been implicated in the invention of the Malay race. Stamford Raffles, for example, changed the name of a major Malay text, originally titled *Peraturan Segala Raja-Raja* ('Rules for Rulers'), to *Sejarah Melayu* ('Malay Annals'), thus turning what was a genealogical description of the rituals and ceremonies of kings into the history of a race which did not exist. Another early player in the invention of the Malay race was William Marsden, the eighteenth-century English orientalist, who wrote in his book *The History of Sumatra* that the Peninsula (west Malaysia) was the place of origin of the Malays. This was subsequently translated into Malay as *Tanah Melayu* ('land of the Malays'), a 'fact' which Malay-centric Malays now use to support their claim that Malaysia belongs to the Malay race.

Today, the Malaysian Federal Constitution defines Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom."[97] This *cultural* definition, which differs from the racial understanding of 'Malay' in everyday discourse, is loose enough to be able to include individuals from a whole range of backgrounds (Indian-Muslims, Arabs, Javanese, and so on) who were either born in the country or born of at least one Malaysian parent. Once recognized as Malay, they will have

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[95] Anthony Reid, "Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32.3 (2001): 297.

[96] Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 4.

[97] *Malaysia: Federal Constitution* (Kuala Lumpur: MDC, 1993): 158.

access to special Malay privileges such as scholarships, loans, state subsidies and priority in all fields. By the definition of the constitution, being Malay means doing Malay things, but on the social level, doing Malay things alone is not necessarily enough for one to gain recognition and acceptance as Malay. Malays of Indian Muslim extraction, for instance, are commonly derogated as *klings* or *kelings* and stereotyped as shrewd money-lenders who are infinitely covetous of 'Malay' women. This is perpetrated not only in everyday life but also by such institutions as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the national guardian of Malay language and literature. In DBP's authoritative Malay-English dictionary, the word *keling* is used as a root word to create descriptive phrases like *keling karam* ("a person who likes to make a lot of noise when talking or while working"),[98] *keling mabuk todi* ("a person who is fond of talking nonsense"),[99] *lidah keling* ("a person with forked tongue)"[100] and *akal keling* ("a slick cheater with a conspiring mind").[101] Another group of 'impure' Malays worth mentioning here are Chinese Muslim converts. Although Islam is theoretically blind on matters of ethnicity, Chinese converts in Malaysia are, in their capacity as cultural Malays, incorporated into neither the larger Malay-Muslim community nor the Chinese community. They exist on the fringes within their own association in relative isolation from other Muslim organizations. Yet another example are the *Peranakan* Chinese, who, despite having absorbed Malay language, dressing and traditions into their culture, are still "genetically" Chinese, according to Mohd. Taib Osman.[102]

Clearly, to be accepted as 'real Malay' on the social level requires more than cultural and religious credentials. It demands something in excess of both: race, upon which rests the pseudo-scientific belief that one cannot become Malay; one can only be Malay by birth. But is there such a thing as 'real Malay'? Even Malays who look and act like 'real' Malays and who primarily identify themselves as such have been known to oscillate in private between being Malay and not-quite-Malay. As Judith Nagata observes in the field, a Malay can stress "us Malays" and proclaim in the next conversational turn that he is Arab and that "Arabs are not lazy like Malays."[103] Rarely if ever is

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[98] *Kamus Dewan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 3rd ed. 1994): 615.

[99] *Kamus Dewan*, 615.

[100] *Kamus Dewan*, 807.

[101] *Kamus Dewan*, 19.

[102] Mohd. Taib Osman, *Kebudayaan Melayu dalam beberapa Persoalan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1988): 128.

[103] Judith Nagata, "What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society," *American Ethnologist* 1.2 (1974): 340.

the nonexistence of 'real Malay' openly acknowledged, even though it is not unknown that if

> you scratch a Malay […] you are likely to find anything from a Thai to a Turk, from a Makasarese to a Malayali underneath, or a bit of a Chinese or even a scrap of an *Orang Putih* [Caucasian]. Similarly you scratch a Chinese and the fellow who lies below the surface can be anyone from a Mongolian to a Malay. Or a Portuguese. And Penang is full of Indians with Malay (or is it Malay with Indian) blood thumping UMNO tables as vigorously as Dollah or Anwar or Daim or Kadir or Mahathir.[104]

'Real Malay' is a fabrication of colonial and Malay ideologists who drew together disparate social subjects and created a semblance of social cohesion and historical particularity. It works only if its inherent impossibility is transposed into a prohibition. That is to say, 'What I am racially not' must be turned into 'What "they" are doing to my race' by assigning to the racial Other (Europeans, Jews, the Chinese, Indians posing as Malays) the role of external blockage or the ones who want to contaminate or dominate our race and do us in. Furthermore, the Other must not only always be delimited as radically Other, he must also be antagonized, baited, even made to experience pain – why? As we discussed previously, what is at stake in racism is never just about power and wealth. At the bottom of it, there is the obscene excessive enjoyment (*jouissance*) to which the racist is 'irrationally' addicted and which washes over him when he inflicts pain upon his victim by word or deed. As Žižek puts it, "The victim's pain has the weight of an ontological proof: it demonstrates that the Other exists in the real, beyond symbolic fiction, in the fullness of his/her being."[105]

It is arguably for this reason that the UMNO-dominated Malaysian government routinely introduces national policies which sideline or antagonize ethnic minorities in the country. Consider, as a case in point, the controversy surrounding the National Culture Policy in the 1980s. In the grips of Malay cultural revivalism, the UMNO declared that Malay identity must be made the centre of all aspects of the national culture. Where other cultures were concerned, only certain 'suitable' elements may be included, but only as adjuncts

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[104] K. Das, *Malay Dominance? The Abdullah Rubric* (Kuala Lumpur: K. Das Ink, 1987): 18–19.

[105] Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You With My Eyes; or, The Invisible Master," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Slavoj Žižek & Renata Salecl (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 1996): 105.

to the central *bumiputra* component. The policy raised a storm among the "new immigrants," a derogatory term Anwar Ibrahim (then the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport) used in referring to non-Malay citizens of the country. Anwar tried to reassure ethnic minorities that the incorporation of Malay-Islamic values into the national culture was not to eclipse other cultures. To suppress other cultures, he said without irony, was like practising narrow nationalism, and such a practice was inconsistent with Islamic teachings. As a show of the regime's 'sincerity', he subsequently announced that the government was willing to hold talks with anyone, on the conditions that the principles of the policy were accepted first and that the policy was not criticized. Criticisms, said Anwar, would be rejected, because those who criticize ('politicize') the policy would only cause a lot of misunderstanding. The view was echoed by other UMNO leaders, one of whom declared that questioning the policy was tantamount to breaking the unity of the people. The circumvention of debate and the branding of critics as politicking troublemakers by the UMNO illustrate how racism and anti-democratic practices can work together to obscure the power relations operating behind the appearance of neutrality. Indeed, as Žižek underscores, "the basic aim of antidemocratic politics is and was depoliticization – that is, the unconditional demand that 'things should go back to normal', with each individual doing his or her particular job."[106]

Malay-Islamist Hegemony

From as far back as independence, the UMNO has consistently taken the contradictory position of denying that the policy of Malay dominance is about casting non-Malays in an inferior position and, at the same time, undermining the creation of a Malaysia that does not discriminate between Malaysians "as a matter of right" and Malaysians "as a matter of hospitality."[107] Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, states that it was for this reason that Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia in **1965**. The UMNO was determined to "maintain total Malay supremacy,"[108] instead of working towards a 'Malaysian Malaysia', an inclusive nation which is not identified with the supremacy, well-being and interests of any particular ethnic group. Lee recounts that, back in **1965**, the UMNO would say in parlia-

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[106] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London & New York: Verso, **1999**): **188**.

[107] Lee, *The Singapore Story*, **624**.

[108] The *Singapore Story*, **547**.

ment and before the international media: "Yes, Malaysian Malaysia. Yes, we all agree. It is an old concept."[109] But in their private circuit, its members would indulge in racist propaganda and aggressively stoke Malay hatred for ethnic Chinese. "Every time they […] wanted to have things their way in the Alliance, they used the threat: 'blood will flow.' The meaning is that our [Chinese] blood will flow."[110] When invited to discuss their differences rationally, UMNO supporters shouted "We are united, we are ready to die."[111] The situation, according to Lee, was impossible:

> Some people may wonder why it is that we are not just keeping quiet and allowing people to say what they like, such as "Malays unite." They shout this everywhere […] Everyday they are pumping this out in Jawi [Arabic script]. I say people get worried. If among the Chinese you hear people say, "Hokkiens unite," all the non-Hokkiens will say "What is this all about? Is it to wallop the non-Hokkiens?" So, when they say "Malays unite," we say "What is this all about?" It is a fair question.[112]

Today, as from its inception, the UMNO dominates the coalition government, dictating national policies and giving them a heavily pro-Malay emphasis. Both UMNO and BN party leaders and supporters, including Mahathir himself, have faced charges of ethical perversion in the decades they have been in power. They have on record repudiated the charges, albeit not too convincingly. For example, despite well-documented evidence to the contrary,[113] they have consistently denied that the special rights accorded to

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[109] Inche Senu, cited in Lee, *The Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, **1965**): **30**. Inche Senu (Senu bin Abdul Rahman) was a top-ranking UMNO politician and member of parliament whom Tunku Abdul Rahman referred to as *Api* ('Fire').

[110] Lee, *The Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia*, **18**.

[111] Lee, *The Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia*, **28**. Although Lee was describing the Malay 'ultras' of the late **1950**s and early **1960**s, his description is not inapplicable today. Only recently did Mohd Khir Toyo, the Chief Minister of Selangor, warn non-Malays that Malays were "willing to bathe in blood" to protect Malay privileges. See Yusof Ghani, "Prepare to Suffer the Same Fate as Suqiu, Chinese Education Movement Told," *Malaysiakini.com* (**21** June **2002**).

[112] Lee, *The Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia*, **17**.

[113] See, for example, Edmund Terence Gomez & Jomo K.S., *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits* (**1997**; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, **2**nd ed. **1999**).

the Malays as *bumiputras* have become a tool for political domination over ethnic minorities and a ploy to create a breed of elites who have since "effectively cornered economic planning and decision-making to enrich themselves while paying lip-service to poverty eradication."[114] On the contested status of Malaysia as an Islamic state, the government has advised Malaysians to accept the 'fact' "without doubt and worry."[115] *Dhimmis* (non-Muslims living under the protection of an Islamic state) are asked not to fear the erosion of their right to religious freedom, even though at least thirty Indian temples in the state of Selangor have in recent times been earmarked for demolition because "We do not want temples mushrooming."[116] This, also, in spite of Tunku Abdul Rahman's (Malaysia's first Prime Minister) clarification in Parliament on 1 May 1958: "I would like to make it clear that this country is not an Islamic State as it is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the State."[117] Elsewhere the Tunku warned that "unless we are prepared to drown every non-Malay, we can never think of an Islamic administration."[118]

Mahathir and UMNO politicians who subscribe to the racial ideology he espouses often argue that "democracy has been successfully practised" in Malaysia because "Malaysians, Malaysian politicians and Malaysian political parties know how to use this democratic system."[119] They deny that the judiciary and parliament have been rendered subservient to arbitrary executive power, and that human rights have been reduced to a namesake directly confronting the rule of law.[120] Human rights, as Mahathir is fond of saying, are

[114] Ozay Mehmet, *Development in Malaysia: Poverty, Wealth and Trusteeship* (London & Dover NH: Croom Helm, 1986): Preface.

[115] Abd. Manaf bin Haji Ahmad, *Penjelasan Mengenai Malaysia Sebagai Negara Islam* ('Clarification on Malaysia as an Islamic State') (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas, Kementerian Penerangan Malaysia, 2002): 9.

[116] Mohamad Khir Toyo, cited in Elan Perumal, "MB Tells Why Temples Have To Go," *Star Online* (Kuala Lumpur; 27 October 2001).

[117] Federal Legislative Council of Malaya, *Official Report of the Second Legislative Council for the Period (Third Session) September 1957 – October 1958* (Kuala Lumpur: Govt. Press): 4672. Tunku Abdul Rahman was Malaysia's first Prime Minister, also known as *Bapa* Malaysia or 'Father of Malaysia'.

[118] "Govt. Couldn't Adopt Islamic System of Rule, says Tunku," *Straits Times* (Singapore; 1 May 1959): 4.

[119] Mahathir Mohamad, "The Challenges of Turmoil: Speech delivered at the 1998 UMNO General Assembly," *Star Online* (Kuala Lumpur; 19 June 1998).

[120] On Malaysia's compromised judicial system, see report by International Bar Association et al., *Justice in Jeopardy* (London: IBA, 2000).

not just about the right to dissent. Instead of dissenting and jeopardizing national stability, says a special booklet issued by the Ministry of Information, citizens would be better served in this life and the after-life if they remain loyal to the government.[121] That is because, in 'true' Islam, loyalty to the government is not just the duty of all citizens, it is also loyalty to God, just as disloyalty to the government equals disloyalty to God.[122] Muslims are especially duty-bound to "obey each and every one of the government's orders, whether they like it or not."[123] If they disapprove of the government's actions, they should "condemn only those actions and never withdraw their loyalty or attempt to challenge the government."[124] In addition, according to the government booklet, citizens must at all times use "gentle words"[125] in their dealings with the government, because the Prophet Muhammad teaches his followers that

> whosoever wishes to advise the authorities about a matter should not do it directly, but should instead hold the person's hand and give the advice privately. If the advice is accepted, that is a good thing, but if it is not accepted, the adviser is considered to have fulfilled his responsibilities.[126]

If "we can live in comfort, we can work and earn a living from our toil,"[127] are we not at least obliged to listen to and obey the government, so long as we are not asked to do evil? The question might seem naive but we need to bear in mind that those who have been deeply socialized to accept and even appreciate authoritarian rule, norms and institutions do not always recognize the reality of their condition. As Anna Marie Smith puts it, "the experience of subordination does not guarantee that the subordinated social agent will develop a radical perspective *vis-à-vis* her subjection."[128] It should also be remembered that "democratic and authoritarian characteristics [...] do not ne-

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[121] Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam* ('Malaysia is an Islamic State') (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas, Kementerian Penerangan Malaysia, **2001**): **14**.

[122] Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, **12**.

[123] *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, **14**.

[124] *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, **18**.

[125] *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, **21**.

[126] Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, **21**.

[127] Mahathir Mohamad, "The Challenges of Turmoil."

[128] Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe*, **8**.

cessarily contradict each other but can often be mutually supporting."[129] An authoritarian regime can conduct free elections in such a way that it will never lose. It can restrict political competition, manipulate the mass media, and legalize arbitrary arrests and detention without trial. It can also invoke Islam to give its opposition containment strategies the appearance of divine necessity.[130]

Conceivably, there would be some who would be genuinely unable to grasp how they might be seen as living in an authoritarian climate, just as the proverbial 'stupid' native cannot integrate into his reality the 'impossible' fact that white men in colonial metropolitan centres do work as manual labourers, the traditional occupation of 'backward races'. One is tempted to argue, however, that the majority of the citizenry tend to misrecognize the reality of things in the Lacanian sense of the term. For instance, although ethnic minorities in Malaysia know that they are legal citizens of the country but are treated as something less, they continue to act in their daily lives as if they do not know, as if it is somehow 'anti-Malay' or 'unpatriotic' to point out that the playing field is tilted against them by virtue of their 'race'. Like practical solipsists rehearsing the formula of fetishistic disavowal, they carry on with their daily lives (pay taxes, read regime-controlled newspapers, apply for this or that permit and licence from the authorities) as if all is well. That is precisely how ideology functions; we are successfully interpellated as a result of our *actions*, regardless of what we know or might have to say about it.

Apart from the one who genuinely does not know and the practical solipsist who does not want to know, there is a third category of Malaysians, which Maniam calls "the new diaspora." We will be discussing this in Chapter 7, in the context of his writings, so it suffices for now just to mention that the new diaspora consists of a small minority of men and women who, although dispersed among different cultural communities, all live "within a common mental and imaginative space."[131] Members of this diaspora are cognizant of the falsity of the national fantasy that 'everything is OK' and are prepared to

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[129] Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 1996): 5.

[130] See, for example, Astora Jabat, "ISA Menurut Rasulullah" ('The Internal Security Act, according to God'), *Utusan Online* (Kuala Lumpur; 13 September 2001), in which the draconian act, which allows for arbitrary arrest and detention without trial, is justified as lawful and necessary in Islam.

[131] K.S. Maniam, "The New Diaspora," in *Globalisation and Regional Communities: Geoeconomic, Sociocultural and Security Implications for Australia*, ed. Donald H. McMillen (Toowomba, Qld.: USQ Press, 1997): 23.

expose it as what Lacan has provocatively called "a gift of shit."[132] They seek to radicalize the Malaysian way of life by repoliticizing normalized racial identities and sedimented sociosymbolic practices, and to hegemonize a new national imaginary which is dominated less by race and religion than by issues of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance.

Religion is Race

Although not yet widespread, there is today a growing belief that race is becoming a spent force in Malaysian politics, that more than four decades of independence have rendered race less of an issue for both Malays and non-Malays. At least three recent events may be taken to suggest this: first, the displacement of race by Islam as Malaysia's number-one issue in public debate; second, the government's rhetorical push for the abolition of racial quotas for local university admissions; and third, the UMNO's rejection of the brand of fundamentalist Islam and Islamic state promoted by its Malay-Islamist arch-rival, the Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS). In a sense, it is true that race has been eclipsed by Islam. However, the reason for this is not that the long-standing race issue has been settled or that "Malaysians have accepted the alpha status of Malays."[133] If anything, the divide between Malays and non-Malays has grown wider (as even the government has acknowledged),[134] and non-Malays have become even more cynical about Malay racism. To reiterate: if race has been eclipsed by Islam, it is not because race has become irrelevant. For, even as race recedes or, more precisely, even as Malay as a master-signifier seems to have receded a little into the background, it returns in force in the guise of religion, in Islam, "the membrane which keeps the Malays and non-Malays apart, even as it fragments Malays."[135]

The reflowering of Islam as a political and ideological force in Malaysia is what Étienne Balibar would describe as the second stage of Malay national-

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[132] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 268.

[133] Mohammad Bakri Musa, *The Malay Dilemma Revisited: Race Dynamics in Modern Malaysia* (Gilroy CA: Merantau, 1999): 224.

[134] Mahathir Mohamad has admitted that the national school system, originally set up to promote ethnic cohesion, has been hijacked by overzealous Malay-Muslims who wish to emphasize the characteristics of Malayness and plant elements of the Islamic religion in these schools. See B. Suresh Ram, "Truly National Schools," *Sun* (Kuala Lumpur; 14 February 2003): 1.

[135] Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and their Roots* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1984): xvi.

ism.[136] To ensure its effectiveness after the first stage of struggle for independence, Malay nationalism has to regenerate by transcending national differences and appealing to transnational solidarities. It has to stretch out to an infinite totality, going beyond national boundaries in idealizing a transhistorical community, the *ummah*, a global community of Muslims which counterposes itself against non-Muslim nations. Islamist resurgence in Malaysia has been a drawn-out affair, a phenomenon which has been linked to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the failure of independence and capitalist modernity to improve the living standards of poor Malays.[137] Instead of rehearsing its history, I only want to remark upon the ways in which it has radically transformed the political landscape and upped the stakes for non-Muslim Malaysians.

From independence until the past several years, the main struggle of ethnic minorities in the country had been to gain recognition as co-equals and to be allowed to participate in all spheres of life as full citizens, irrespective of 'race'. With the rise of Islamism, however, the struggle has had to be scaled back from expanding the field of freedom to halting its contraction. Although sporadic, reported incidents of racism and religious intolerance have been on the rise. To cite a few recent cases: a Malay girl was advised by her *ustazah* (female religious teacher) to stop mixing with her non-Muslims friends because they were infidels. In a polytechnic in Ipoh, graduands were instructed to wear the *songkok* (Malay-Muslim male head-gear) or *tudung* (headscarf used by female Muslims) for their convocation, even if they were non-Muslims. University bureaucrats, long known for discouraging non-Malay-Muslim students from organizing on-campus religious and cultural activities, recently prevented Indian undergraduates from putting up a decorative flower arrangement before *Deepavali* because it was *haram* (forbidden in Islam). Even Muslims themselves have not been spared. A zealous *ustazah* ordered her fifteen year-old student to stop playing with Barbie dolls because the name "Barbie" sounded too much like *babi* (pig, the consumption of whose meat is prohibited in Islam). Another Muslim girl was told by her disciplinary teacher that she should either wear a *tudung* or stop coming to school.[138]

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[136] Étienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," in Balibar & Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, tr. Chris Turner (*Race, nation, classe: Les identités ambiguës*, 1988; London & New York: Verso, 1991): 62.

[137] Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).

[138] See Brendan Pereira, "Silent Majority Behind Rising Religious Intolerance," *Malay Mail* (Kuala Lumpur; 4 January 2003): 19; and Wong Chun Wai, "Don't Allow Racists To Lead Us Astray," *Sunday Star* (Kuala Lumpur; 9 February 2003): 28.

To those opposed to the islamicization of Malaysia, the real issue is not whether Islam is inherently a religion of peace or intolerance, but how it can be seen as ethical that Islam (or any religion, for that matter) is installed in an ethnically and religiously plural country as the framework through which everything, from morality to politics, is to be weighted and judged. Their worry is that Islam is being made to carry too many things. Aside from serving as one of the three pillars of Malayness (the other two being the Malay language and the Malay sultanate, whose history we covered earlier), it has to act as a channel for the expression of Malay racial angst, an object of passionate identification which simultaneously unites and divides the Malays, the panacea for Western moral decadence, and the "solution to all human problems, including issues arising from a plural society."[139] Those opposed to the sacralization of the state also worry that the Malay-Muslims' "almost extraordinary attachment" to outward manifestations of Islam (food, attire, symbols, practices) has less to do with religiosity than with the desire to fortify the ethnic cocoon around themselves. Above all, they fear that Islam is increasingly being used to prevent non-Muslims from having any meaningful say in the way the country and their lives are managed.

The PAS has made no secret of its intention "to embody Islam as a 'Belief and State'," should it come to power.[140] It has publicly undertaken to create an Islamist utopia in which the secular Federal Constitution is subordinated to the Quran, and citizens are obliged "to render their obedience and trust to the leadership of the country for as long as they obey *Allah*."[141] Some are sceptical that the PAS's Islamic State would ever materialize, so long as the BN remains in power. Whether such optimism is justified is debatable, but what is clear is that the BN, although ideologically different from the PAS, is itself not opposed to islamicizing the nation. Far from it: as stated in the earlier-mentioned booklet published by the Ministry of Information, a national policy has been put in place to ensure that "everything which conflicts with Islam will be harmonised according to the demands of Islam."[142] This systematic infusion of Islamic values on all levels of society is designated as a long-term project to be completed in stages "until the objective of establishing an Islamic nation is fully realised."

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[139] Parti Islam Se Malaysia, *The Islamic State Document* (Batu Caves: Parti Islam Se Malaysia, 2003): 37.

[140] Parti Islam Se Malaysia, *The Islamic State Document*, 12.

[141] *The Islamic State Document*, 30.

[142] Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, *Malaysia adalah sebuah Negara Islam*, 8.

It is in the above context that K.S. Maniam is located as a writer. In Part III we will see that such works of Maniam's as *The Return* and *In A Far Country* engage with the big themes (racism and its impact on Malaysia; religion and its place in a plural nation; the enjoyment and perils of self-insularity; and so on) in a sustained, self-reflexive way, without clinging or lending support to the myth of the natural separatedness of the 'races' in Malaysia. Directly or tangentially, they critique Malaysia's communal isolation and development, its lack of a genuinely inclusive multicultural policy, and its elevation of one race and one religion above everything. As we shall see, these works focus primarily on alienated, 'insignificant' individuals striving to know and make something of themselves in an unhomely world, all longing to belong but constantly reminded of their marginal place in the Malay-Islamic scheme of things. To quote Maniam:

> I'm preoccupied with the question of whether you belong or don't belong. Why as a writer I'm so preoccupied with that is because everywhere you turn they ostracise you. They say you're a nobody. So, you have to find out why you're a nobody and how you can become a somebody. Or the forces that have made you a nobody.[143]

[143] Lim Chong Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam (September **1999**, Kuala Lumpur); unpublished.

PART II
BEN OKRI: THE *ABIKU* TRILOGY

Stories are always a form of resistance.[1]

[1] Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven* (London: Phoenix, **1996**): **34**.

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3 *The Famished Road*

The Road to Nigeria

TO THE BOOKER PRIZE JUDGES who picked Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (*TFR*) as the winner in 1991, it was a "beautifully written and moving novel [which] convey[ed] *Nigerian* peasant life in a changing world."[1] From the same Vintage edition of the novel, we find a similar view in a review blurb: "Okri's *Nigeria*, on the eve of independence, is a country where people commonly dream strange and sometimes important dreams [... *TFR* reads] like an epic poem."[2] Few indeed would disagree that *TFR* and, by extension, the other two *abiku* novels, *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*) and *Infinite Riches* (*IR*), are directly or indirectly about Nigeria, Okri's country of birth. Our reading will in fact be similarly premissed, except that the Nigerian background is not treated as a given.

Several critics have rightly pointed out that the *abiku* trilogy itself offers few certainties where the setting is concerned. We know that events unfold in an unnamed African country that is about to achieve independence from colonial Britain. It may well be Nigeria, but the word Nigeria never once appears in any of the three texts. There are numerous allusions to politico-historical events that closely correlate with actual developments in Nigeria: "coups and riots, tribal massacres and famine [...] explosions at oil sites, the genocide of war and the decades of hardship to come" (*IR* 49). Yet no specific details and temporal indices are given. We are not told the names of the tribes quarrelling with one another, "disputing their myths of supremacy and their legends of the origin of all things" (*SOE* 207). And we cannot say with absolute certainty if the "genocide" in question is an allusion to the Biafran war which we looked at in Chapter 2. There are a number of sociocultural references which

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[1] Review blurb from Jeremy Treglowan, Chairman of the Booker Prize Judges, in the introductory pages of Okri's *TFR* (1991; London: Vintage, 1992).

[2] Linda Grant, *Independent on Sunday* (my emphasis).

are of Nigerian or at least West African origin. The calabashes of palm-wine, the *abiku* (Yoruba for 'spirit child'), the *egungun* procession and the everyday religious rituals are just some of more obvious ones. But the question remains: do these references necessary mean that the novel is *about* Nigeria?

It is instructive to note that Okri's refusal to commit himself either to absolute fixity or to absolute unfixity is not just confined to the *abiku* trilogy. Going through his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, we will find that Nigeria is scarcely ever mentioned by name. Even on the few occasions that it is mentioned, Okri never discusses it as extensively or in the unequivocally 'angry' tone for which pioneer Nigerian writers like Achebe and Soyinka are renowned. Nor have his writings demonstrated overt partiality to any ethnic group, party or geopolitical section of the country. As far as I can ascertain, Okri has published but one piece of writing which directly engages with Nigerian politics. The work in question is "The Catastrophe Now Facing Nigeria," an essay written in response to the Nigerian political crisis resulting from the military proscription of the 1993 election results. "My country's choice," he writes, "is either democracy or the descent into chaos and civil war."[3] Pointing to tribalism, the North–South divide, and military dictatorship as some of the key obstacles to Nigeria's pursuit of nationhood, he warns that "blood might again howl" unless "an intelligent and equitable solution is found." Aside from this essay, Okri has also paid particular attention to the themes of corruption, military brutality and nationhood in his novels, short stories, and poems. Most of these engagements, however, display little contextual specificity.

What are the implications of Okri's purging of definitive references to a particular nation in the trilogy? Does it, for instance, make him "more introspective, more personal, less historically ambitious, [and] less radical, than Achebe and his peers," as Alastair Niven suggests?[4] Leaving the second question aside for now, let us, by way of answering the first, recall certain remarks Okri has made on his strategy of contextual unfixity. In response to the question of how his work reflects life in Nigeria, he says: "The first thing I'd say is that I think it's important to understand that a piece of writing is, first of all, a piece of writing. By that I mean that one may be writing about Nigeria, but that terrain may be the place in which one can best see very strong universal

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[3] Ben Okri, "The Catastrophe Now Facing Nigeria," *Guardian* (London; 6 September 1994).

[4] Alastair Niven, "Achebe and Okri: Contrasts in the Response to Civil War," in *Short Fiction in the New Literatures in English*, ed. Jacqueline Bardolph (Nice: Faculté des Lettres and Sciences Humaines, 1989): 282.

concerns."[5] On *TFR* specifically, Okri explains that the aim was to write an "unfixed book, a river" text that reflected the African aesthetic.[6] He describes this aesthetic as "bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions," and as characterized by a boundless openness to endless possibilities and a celebration of riddles and paradoxes.[7] Crucially, he says, any attempt to fix the aesthetic "too much within national or tribal boundaries" would only contradict the spirit of the work.[8]

Okri's strategy of contextual unfixity works hand in hand with what we might call his technique of 'narrative stealth' to circumvent interpretative closure. In a videotaped interview by Edward Blishen,[9] Okri remarks that people rarely want to know or read about their condition, to confront and vanquish the "ghosts and monsters that we all carry within us"; or, in the words of his character Dad, "the corpses in the consciousness of all peoples, [...] things that weigh us down and drag us towards death and prevent us from growing" (*SOE* 289). That is why, Okri says, with certain works he finds it necessary to eschew social realism for what he calls "a deeper kind of realism" so as to lure readers into thinking that "they are reading about something else when in fact they are reading about themselves."[10] Okri has also articulated this notion of stealth in several of his essays, including 'The Joys of Storytelling I':

> Storytelling is always, quietly, subversive. It is a double-headed axe. You think it faces only one way, but it also faces you. You think it cuts only in one direction, but it also cuts you. You think it applies to others only, when it applies mainly to you. When you think it is harmless, that is when it springs its hidden truths, its uncomfortable truths, on you. It startles your complacency. And when you no longer listen, it lies silently in your brain, waiting.[11]

What we have just seen should serve as a caution against narrowly reading the *abiku* trilogy as just another story about Nigeria in search of nationhood, as if

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[5] Jean W. Ross, "Ben Okri," in *Contemporary Authors* 138 (Detroit MI: Gale, 1993): 337.

[6] Jane Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers: Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists* (London: James Currey, 1992): 88.

[7] Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers*, 87–88.

[8] *Talking with African Writers*, 88.

[9] Edward Blishen, *Ben Okri with Edward Blishen* (36 mins.; London: ICA, 1988).

[10] Blishen, *Ben Okri with Edward Blishen*.

[11] Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997): 43.

it were solely about 'their' (Nigerians' and Africans') struggles and we were somehow outside the realm of the work's concern. To read the trilogy as such would be to miss the significance of its open-endedness and double-edgedness – two features that are central not only to Okri's design for the trilogy but also to his overarching philosophical vision, which we will be mapping in the course of our discussion.

Abiku Nation

It is signalled early in *The Famished Road* (*TFR*), the first book of the *abiku* trilogy, that a momentous event of national proportions is about to take place. Independence is coming and the compound where Azaro, the spirit-child narrator, and his impoverished parents live is "aflame with politics" (*TFR* **128**). The day politics makes its first public appearance, the compound literally turns into "a place of vomiting" (**130**), an ominous foreboding of things to come. Men, women and children who earlier consumed the "rotten milk of politics" (**132**) distributed to the poor by the Party of the Rich to canvass their votes are found retching and contorted in agony all over the compound as the poison courses through their system. Politics has well and truly arrived, and, according to Dad, Azaro's load-carrying father, it has begun to spoil everything. As independence approaches, the victimization of the compound people progressively worsens. By the time we get to *SOE* and *IR*, they have already become "ghosts of history" (*IR* **228**). In Azaro's words:

> We were the empty bodies on whose behalf the politicians and soldiers rule; we were not real. We could not communicate our desires save by the intensity of our cheering or hissing. We were shadows in the world of power; the mere spectators of phenomena, the victims of speeches. We were meant to listen, never to speak. We were not meant to feel or to think or argue or dissent. Assent was all we were good for. (*IR* **228–29**)

TFR makes it clear that the nation is dying from bad politics before it is even born, and that there is a political tug of war between the powerless but awakened few and those acting as a brake on the awakening consciousness of the people. A choice between living and dying has to be made. Will the nation work towards attaining a harmony of politics and heart and the realization of its "fabulous possibilities" (*IR* **201**), or will it, alternatively, persist as an *abiku* nation, an eternal undead that is unable to flower because it vacillates between wanting to live and wanting to die?

Before I unpack the notion of the *abiku* nation, it would be helpful to examine first the *abiku* as a sociocultural phenomenon. A Yoruba term, the

abiku (or *ogbanje* in Igbo) is believed to be part human and part spirit, a liminal entity bound to the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth. *Abiku*, which literally means 'one who is born, dies', has been described as a "club" of child-criminals who come from heaven to siphon off riches from the houses of the "world-people."[12] In southern Nigeria, where belief in the *abiku* is prevalent, it is said that before an *abiku* enters the phenomenal world it will make a pact with its companions, promising to return to the spirit-world on a predetermined date. It then spirits itself into its earthly mother's womb in order to be born, live a short mischievous life, and then will itself unto death before a full and natural life-cycle is completed. The *abiku* then repeats the cycle, often returning to the same hapless mother. The condition is a curse, because it condemns the *abiku* to perpetually live out half an inconsolable life in the spirit-world and the conventional world. But it is a 'gift' insofar as it affords the *abiku* terrible powers over its parents, who live in constant fear of its early demise and return to the spirit-world.

The *abiku* is generally dreaded by the living and regarded as eccentric or mad because of its regular 'soliloquies' or mysterious conversations with invisible spirit-friends. Often cantankerous, unpredictable and prone to fights, it is said to "collapse and if not attended to soon enough, die" when physically punished.[13] It is also perennially sickly and in need of medical attention. To sever the *abiku*'s link to the spirit-world and bind it to its earthly home, the *abiku*'s magic token, usually buried in a remote area, must be found and destroyed. Or, according to another account, the *abiku*'s "sealed words" (secret oaths containing information on the time, circumstances and method of its impending return to the spirit-world) must be discovered by a *babaláwo* ('witch-doctor'), who will then use them to break the *abiku*'s death-wish.[14] If the suspected *abiku* dies within days of birth, its body is whipped and mutilated to deter its return. The body may be marked by shaving a spot on its head, cutting a notch in its ear, or severing a toe or finger.[15] Once in a while, the *abiku* may decide to renege on the promise to its companions in order to remain in the world of the living. When that happens, the *abiku*'s spirit kin will attempt

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[12] Douglas McCabe, "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Àbíkú Texts and Soyinka's '*Abiku*'," *Research in African Literatures* **33.1** (**2002**): **46**.

[13] Chinwe Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, **1986**): **30–31**.

[14] McCabe, "Histories of Errancy," **46**.

[15] William Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, **1993**): **35**.

to lure it back home by persuasion or force. The latter involves making life as uncomfortable as possible for the *abiku* renegade.

The *abiku* phenomenon has inspired a wide range of African writers before Okri, including J.P. Clark, Buchi Emecheta, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Scholars such as Ato Quayson and Olatubosun Ogunsanwo have looked at the ways in which some of these other writers have used the *abiku* trope in their writings,[16] so I will not be covering that ground, except to note that, in contrast to the standard ethnographical conception, and notwithstanding the *abiku*'s tendency to upset "all kinds of balances" (*TFR* 5), Okri does not portray Azaro and his *abiku* companion Ade as mere thieves or sadistic spirits bent on bringing nothing but misery to their earthly parents, but infuses them with a vaguely Christ-like quality. The first intimation of this is found early in *TFR* when Azaro says that spirit-children often return to the spirit-world inconsolable for "all the suffering they hadn't redeemed" (3). Similar insights into the extra-traditional role of Okri's *abikus* are found in *SOE*. To Azaro, Ade says, "I was born to love this world as I find it. And to change it if I can" (*SOE* 196). In a scene following his botched attempt to kill Madame Koto, Ade reveals that by failing he has fulfilled his higher destiny as catalyst: "The tears of a child dying of hunger in a remote part of the country can start a civil war. I am the tears of a child. I am the country crying for what is going to happen in the future" (195).

Like Ade, the precocious Azaro – superstitiously shortened from Lazaro by Mum because of its uneasy echo of Lazarus – is an *abiku* with a mission. The difference is that Azaro is an *abiku* who, according to a herbalist, "didn't want to be born, but who will fight with death" (*TFR* 8). Somewhere between the endless coming and going, he makes the momentous decision to commit to life. In doing so, he effectively forfeits the aquamarine paradise of his original home, a world of pure dreams where suffering does not exist and spirits bathe in the radiance of diverse rainbows. Interestingly, Azaro is fully aware not only of what he is leaving behind but also of what is in store for him in the world of the living: namely, "the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe" (3). Azaro's decision to make

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[16] See Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), and Olatubosun Ogunsanwo, "Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995).

this 'terroristic' break has nothing to do with the usual earthly pleasures derivable from human "offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts" or the "promises of special treatment" (5). Nor would it be accurate to reduce it to his wanting "to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would be [his] mother" (5). Azaro offers no determinate reason, except this:

> It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going [...] It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. (*TFR* 5)

Described as a "lonely" child (*SOE* 5) with a "lonely heart" (*IR* 65) "wandering an unhappy world" (*IR* 217), Azaro is driven by a melancholic longing for the mysterious sublimity of living. But why melancholy? Why is paradise insufficient? To answer these questions, it would be useful to invoke Žižek's definition of melancholy as explicated in his critique of *Satyricon* (1969), a film by the Italian director Federico Fellini. Based on Gaius Petronius' first-century Roman satire of the same name, *Satyricon* is about a pre-Christian universe in which notion of Christian redemption is absent. Žižek writes that although the pagan Romans do not know that salvation is coming, they are already suffering from a "strange sadness, a kind of fundamental melancholy."[17] It is as if "they somehow already have the premonition that the true God will soon reveal Himself, and that they were born just a little too early, so that they cannot be redeemed." The lesson to be derived from this is similar to the Hegelian dialectic of alienation:

> We are not dealing with the Paradise which is […] lost due to some fatal intrusion – there is already in paradisiacal satisfaction […] something suffocating, a longing for fresh air, for an opening that would break the unbearable constraint; and this longing introduces into Paradise an unbearable Pain, a desire to break out – life in Paradise is always pervaded by an infinite melancholy.[18]

The Roman figures' suffocation and longing for fresh air is comparable to Azaro's experience prior to his (re)birth in *TFR*. For all the paradisiacal pleasures obtainable in the spirit world, Azaro knows that so long as he is bound to the endless *abiku* cycle of coming and going, and committed to neither this

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[17] Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 88.
[18] *The Fragile Absolute*, 88.

nor that realm, he will be denied access to something greater. And it is because of this inkling of there being something greater out there to be experienced that Azaro makes the break. Against this background, Margaret Cezair–Thompson is right to note that Azaro's decision to escape the captivity of time and to replace his power to die with the power to live is a step in the right direction,[19] although it should be qualified that it is not a step *away* from exile, since, as Azaro himself says, "To be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and *an inextinguishable sense of exile*" (*TFR* 5; my emphasis). The question is whether it is justified to argue, as Cezair–Thompson does, that because the *abiku* is symbolic of society's unreadiness or irresolution to live, Azaro's anti-*abiku* commitment to life therefore parallels society's readiness to "move beyond [its] crippling historical-social conditions."[20] It does not appear so. To be sure, the *abiku* condition is symbolic of the nation's undeadness. As Dad himself discovers in the fevers of his dream, theirs is

> a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (*TFR* 494)

However, Azaro's commitment to life cannot really be said to reflect the nation's readiness to move forward, for the reason that it has shown itself to be unready to move forward. Moreover, the nation is repeatedly described in the trilogy as "dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love [and] too many divisions" (*SOE* 91). If the *abiku* condition of coming and going is to be paralleled to the nation, it would be more appropriate to see it strictly in terms of the waxing and waning of the people's will to work towards the nation's future flowering. Alternatively, the unborn nation may be compared with the twisted *abiku* triplets (emblematic perhaps of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria) warring against each other in the pregnant Madame Koto's bloated stomach (*TFR* 464, 494). As for Azaro, it might be more appropriate to view him as symbolic of "the unbreakable things in us"[21] or, in the context of the trilogy, the positive forces struggling to ensure that the nation not only lives but lives up to its potential.

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[19] Margaret Cezair–Thompson, "Beyond the Postcolonial Novel: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and its 'Abiku' Traveller," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31.2 (1996): 43.

[20] Cezair–Thompson, "Beyond the Postcolonial Novel," 41.

[21] Okri, in Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers*, 88.

Suffering and the Logic of the Impossible

On the face of it, Azaro's volitional forfeiture of paradise and decision to face a life of hardship and lonely wandering in search of the river of his destiny might seem somewhat masochistic. Why give up paradise for suffering, however sublime it might be? Why not eliminate suffering altogether? The answer lies in the fact that the total elimination of suffering is, although necessary, simultaneously impossible and undesirable. The logic of this Okrian proposition should already be familiar to us, since it is essentially the same logic which, as discussed in previous chapters, regulates the Lacanian subject's impossible pursuit of completion, and the agent's pursuit of the impossible society in Laclau and Mouffe. If we recall, the Lacanian subject is by definition an empty nothing with an infinite craving for something. The subject believes that by possessing the lost object of his desire, his emptiness will be filled out and a state of ontological plenitude will be attained. What he fails to see is that no positive object is ever 'it', which is the same as saying that desire is inherently inextinguishable. 'It' which does not exist in materiality is designated as the *objet petit a* in Lacan: that is, the non-symbolizable surplus that sets the subject's desire in motion. In itself, the *objet petit a* is literally nothing and ultimately the subject himself. That is why the subject, if and when he actually arrives at himself, will find not the plenitude anticipated but his own radical negation. The subject will find, to his subjective destitution, that he is neither the ego nor the unconscious but an empty vessel devoid of any inherent meaning. So long as the subject misrecognizes this and continues to postpone the moment when he actually 'catches up' with himself, he will continue to exist and pursue completion. In this precise sense, desire may be seen as the condition of possibility and impossibility for the realization of the subject's completion. In the same way, Laclau and Mouffe designate antagonisms as the condition of possibility and impossibility for the realization of a society from which antagonisms have been entirely eliminated. Antagonisms which threaten society's stability must be eradicated before a free society can be constituted. However, the complete eradication of antagonisms can only result in society's disintegration, since without an outlet for subordinated, oppressed or dominated communities to articulate and redress their problems, there can be no free society in the true sense of the word. Because of the paradoxical status of antagonism, the ideal democratic society is, like the Lacanian subject's desired fullness, an ideal that is a good only insofar as it cannot be reached.

For Okri, the same logic of the impossible is articulated in spiritual-aesthetic rather than psychoanalytic or political terms. In place of desire or antagonism, he places suffering at the heart of the logic. He acknowledges that

suffering in its multiple forms (poverty, oppression, dislocation, exile, self-sabotage, and so on), depending on the intensity with which it is experienced, can corrupt, break, or destroy a person. Nevertheless, suffering – when it reaches the limits of human endurance – can also empower, because it is ultimately "the thing in us which most makes the spirit wake up."[22] As Okri puts it elsewhere,

> Suffering drenches [the oppressed] in mystery. Intensities of existence accelerate their ageing. They mature more strangely and more deeply than their oppressors […] They may be dwindling but it is precisely because of all they have suffered and are still suffering that they have much to struggle for, to be alive for.[23]

In the *abiku* trilogy, suffering is the driving force that propels characters like Azaro and Dad to go beyond themselves and perform 'impossible acts' so as to eliminate the very suffering that drives them in the first place. In this sense, suffering (as a manifestation of lack) is what makes fullness or completion possible. Without it, there would be no need to pursue fullness. The final elimination of suffering, however, is undesirable, as it will only bring about the exact opposite of what it promises to yield: a life of death-like 'perfection' which offers the subject neither reason nor drive to continually expand the boundaries of the possible. The secret here, then, is that the true aim of the pursuit of completion is not completion but *the pursuit itself*. It is through the pursuit precipitated by suffering that the unsuspected powers of the human spirit can be liberated.[24]

To clarify further the tension between the need to eliminate suffering and the need *for* suffering, let us turn to the scene in *TFR* where Azaro stumbles upon a community of dead beings in the interspatial no-man's-land. According to his three-headed spirit-guide, these strange beings once lived for an eternity "as faces on the great tree," but they soon got tired of that (*TFR* 329). One day, their prophet spoke of other "worlds of people high up," particularly a place called Heaven wherein resides a "great people who did not know their own greatness." The prophet urged his people to build a great road to Heaven so that "they could visit those people, and that those people could visit them.

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[22] Okri, cited in Roy Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," *Guardian* (London; 21 August 1999), Guardian Profile: 6.

[23] Ben Okri, "Redreaming the World: An Essay for Chinua Achebe," *Guardian* (London; 9 August 1990), Review: 14.

[24] Ben Okri, *Mental Fight: An Anti-Spell for the 21st Century* (London: Phoenix, 1999): 63.

In this way, they would complete one another and fulfil an important destiny in this universe." The three-headed spirit explains that the prophet gave his people this sublime goal to work towards because they were, like Azaro prior to his rebirth, suffocating within the (en)closure of eternal placidity.

> They wanted to live, to be more alive. They wanted to know the essence of pain, they wanted to suffer, to feel, to love, to hate, to be greater than hate, and to be imperfect in order to always have something to strive towards, which is beauty. They wanted also to know wonder and to live miracles. Death is too perfect. (*TFR* 329)

Driven by this goal, the prophet's people have been building the great road for two thousand years. But they do not know that the road can never be finished and that arrival is impossible:

> When they have built a long section of [the road], or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, landquakes happen […] the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage. (*TFR* 329–30)

The road-builders are unaware of the impossibility of completing their task, but not because they have not been told the truth. Rather, despite having been told the truth, they continue to misperceive it and to act as if they do not know. As the prophet says, "they have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know the most" (*TFR* 330). The road-builders' ignorance of the truth and their resultant pursuit of Heaven perfectly parallel the Lacanian subject's misrecognition of his constitutive lack and impossible pursuit of himself. Without misrecognition, they would not have found it necessary or worthwhile to desire and pursue the impossible. Non-pursuit would mean that their very identity as road-builders would be negated. They would literally cease to exist as road-builders and return to being "faces on the great tree," frozen in death-like perfection. They would also be deprived of the opportunity they presently have as road-builders to explore their "capacity to create, to overcome, / To endure, to transform, to love, / And to be greater than [their] suffering."[25] In the same way that the Lacanian sub-

[25] Okri, *Mental Fight*, 61.

ject's failure to arrive at himself *is* his subjectivity, the road-builders' failure to reach Heaven – as symbolized by the great unfinished road on which all human beings travel – *is* "their soul, the soul of their history" (*TFR* 329). And just as the subject's attainment of completion will result in his radical negation, the road-builders' 'arrival' in Heaven will result in their annihilation. The logic of this ironic reversal of fortune is nicely captured in one of the stories Dad tells Azaro. Once upon a time, an African emperor ordered all the frogs in his kingdom to be exterminated because they were disturbing his sleep. The emperor's order was carried out and he was able to sleep serenely until "the mosquitoes, whose larvae the frogs fed on, came and spread disease. His people fled and what was once a proud land became a desert waste" (*IR* 131).

Desire to Drive

The cycle of toil, arrival, destruction, and recommencement of toil that plots the existence of the road-builders – the cycle of life, as we may call it – is in a sense similar to the *abiku* cycle of birth, death and rebirth discussed earlier. The two cycles are identical, insofar as they both mark the flow of life, the rise and fall or the coming and going of things and events. But there is a crucial difference between the two cycles. Unlike the cycle of life, the *abiku* cycle is a condition of bad infinity. Those fated (or who condemn themselves) to loop *ad infinitum* within its closed circuit do not actually undergo any real change or achieve progress. For the doomed agents, the more things change, the more they remain the same. It is precisely from this strangulating condition of bad infinity that Azaro escapes in order to complete a natural cycle of life in the world of the living. It is also the same condition that qualifies the unborn nation in the trilogy as an *abiku* nation, an obscene undead caught in a state of endless repetition and "arrested development."[26] As further examples of the eternal recurrence of the same, we might recall the road-builders' original existence (immobilized as "faces on the great tree") in which life was measured not by growth but by stillness and stagnation. We might also recall the "strange kind of utopia" (*SOE* 115) Azaro discovers in the mind of the corrupt Party of the Rich's masquerade, a sterile place like the road-builders' old world where there is "no chaos, no confusion, no alternatives, no dialectic, no disturbances."

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[26] Ato Quayson, "Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri's Writing," in *Essays on African Writing 2: Contemporary Literature*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995): 157.

In contrast to *abiku* the cycle of bad infinity, the cycle of life is first and foremost defined by its openness to growth. In concrete terms, it is the cycle of Azaro's new life in the world of the living and the cycle into which the road-builders enter when they commence their pursuit of Heaven. (Heaven, which is populated by a "great people who did not know their own greatness," is ultimately *our* world.) Another point that should be underlined here is that the cycle of life is not regulated by the Big Other: that is, the ultimately non-existent Absolute Guarantor (Historical Necessity, Nature, God, and so forth) we presuppose as the One pulling the strings. It is, rather, the agents themselves who, through their own actions, regulate it. As we saw in the case of the road-builders, it is their own selves who predestine their destiny. If at any time they choose to forget their prophet's words and think that they have completed their task, everything will start to crumble. Until they 'remember', that is, until they begin afresh the impossible journey to Heaven, they will not experience growth. And until they have endured enough suffering and accumulated enough wisdom to fully recognize the truth of life's impossibility, they will not "become gods" (*TFR* **332**).

In Okri, becoming a "god" is not the same as attaining absolute perfection. Rather, it is about effecting a radical mental and attitudinal shift from misrecognition to recognition of the truth concerning the impossibility of Heaven and the significance of that impossibility. For the road-builders, it means recognizing Heaven as "An illusion by which we can become / More real."[27] It means recognizing that although the goal is to arrive at Heaven and meet its inhabitants, the aim is to recognize themselves as the inhabitants of Heaven: that is, imperfect desiring beings who attain satisfaction by pursuing rather than arriving at themselves. Whereas 'non-gods' who, upon receipt of this truth, will abandon the aim (pursuit), paralysing themselves with despair or poisoning themselves with emptiness,[28] Okri's "gods" will embrace the toil of overcoming themselves and the circular alternation of life's ascent and descent as the very reason never to stop pursuing the impossible goal.

The nuances of the shift from road-building to godhood in Okri may be further teased out through Lacan's theory of the transformation of the subject of desire into the subject of drive. As discussed in the Introduction, the subject of desire is by definition impossible. That is to say, although he desires the attainment of his unattainable goal (Heaven), he also desires his desire to remain unsatisfied. It is in this tension that the subject 'enjoys' himself. He experiences *jouissance*, not through the realization of his goal but in the anti-

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[27] Okri, *Mental Fight*, **3**.

[28] *Mental Fight*, **4**.

cipation of its realization. The subject of desire becomes a subject of drive when he crosses the "bridge of self-discovery" (*ATG* 30) and recognizes the truth he has hitherto misrecognized. What sets subject of drive apart from subject of desire is that the former does not long for an object proper, since

> the object of the *drive coincides with the itinerary of the drive* [...] In other words, the object of the drive is not an object [that is] supposed to provide some satisfaction to the subject, but this satisfaction itself: the object of the drive is *satisfaction as object*.[29]

To clarify this distinction between desire and drive, it might be useful to recall Alenka Zupančič's comparison of two legendary seducers, Laclos' Valmont and Molière's Don Juan.[30] Valmont is a subject of desire who sleeps with a succession of women in order to save himself from falling in love with any of them. By avoiding love, Valmont believes he will maintain the gap between himself and love that makes desire possible. Having a succession of lovers is his way of reproducing desire. Don Juan, on the other hand, seduces all kinds of women regardless of age, size, colour and background – not because he has a preference for a variegated menu but because he is indifferent to difference. For Don Juan, "each and every woman *is* the right one, and what drives him further is not what he did not find in his previous lover, but precisely what he *did* find."[31] He "attains satisfaction precisely in so far as his aim is nothing but 'getting back into circulation'." Okri's god is similar to Don Juan (*qua* subject of drive), insofar as his aim is not to arrive but, rather, to 'enjoy' himself by transcending his self-limitations within the cycle of life. For him, the impossibility of arriving *is* the very condition of possibility for infinite self-transcendence.

Although Okri does not explicitly articulate it in psychoanalytic terms, the psychoanalytic notion of 'traversing the fantasy', of "see[ing] things as they really are" (*ATG* 49) is clearly a pivot in the *abiku* trilogy and almost all his publications since *TFR*. It is in *ATG*, though, through a plot that almost parallels the road-builders' impossible pursuit of Heaven, that the theme is given its most thorough treatment. A brief analysis of *ATG* at this point would

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[29] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London & New York: Verso, 2000): 142.

[30] Valmont is the protagonist of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' eighteenth-century French novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* ('Dangerous Liaisons'), while Molière's version of the infamous 'Seducer of Seville' is found in his play *Don Juan or the Statue of the Feast*.

[31] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 136.

therefore be instructive in clarifying the philosophical underpinnings of Okri's *abiku* trilogy. *ATG* narrates the life and quest of a nameless protagonist in search of himself. The protagonist is literally invisible, which does not disturb him (since he is unaware of it) until he is sent to school, where he discovers that neither he nor his people exist in all the history books he reads. This new knowledge introduces a lack in him and sets him off on a quest for the secret of visibility. After seven years of searching, the invisible protagonist arrives on a magical island-utopia inhabited by the Invisibles, a community of beings who are simultaneously "masters of the art of transcendence" and "masters of suffering" (*ATG* **9**). Through them, the protagonist learns to see the same truth that the road-builders in *TFR* have to recognize before they can attain godhood. The truth is that the true aim of his quest is not visibility (perfection, arrival) but a higher invisibility, a "journey towards perfection [that] is continued without any hope of ever arriving" (*ATG* **109**). The Invisibles have long known the truth that is the logic of the impossible. Their achievement has not come easy, as is explained by one of the Invisibles to the nameless protagonist. "It has taken us much suffering, much repetition of our suffering, much stupidity, many mistakes, great patience, and phenomenal love to arrive at this condition" (*ATG* **53**). As gods, they fully recognize "the great laws [guiding] the rise and fall of things" (**53**). They know that as soon as they forget the lessons they have learned through much suffering, their island-utopia will disintegrate. Knowledge of this "horrific" truth does not cripple or turn them into "god-like monsters,"[32] because they recognize that its disintegration would only be "an illusion, an excuse" (*ATG* **53**) to re-learn the truth and to continue scaling higher and hidden levels of invisibility.

Political Strong Poet

In the preceding sections, we have seen how suffering might serve as a catalyst for self-liberation. On the face of it, the idea may seem more spiritual than political, but if we peer deeper we will find that the spiritual in Okri is in fact an aesthetically encoded articulation of the radically political. To explain what is meant by this, let us first retrace our argument. We began by looking at the political tug-of-war taking place in the heart of the unborn nation. On the one side are forces bent on aborting the nation; on the other, there are those, like Dad, fighting to keep it alive. It goes without saying that in a situation where the odds are weighed heavily against the latter, it will be easy for those situated on the wrong side of politics to look at their condition with despair and

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[32] Okri, *Mental Fight*, **13**.

accept their fate as empty bodies on whose behalf politicians and soldiers rule – or worse, join the dark side, as does Madame Koto, the barwoman whose greed turns her into "the GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE" (*TFR* 377). Alternatively, the downtrodden can take the infinitely more rigorous path which leads not to the dead-end of hope but to endless possibilities. These two divergent paths are similar to the path open to Azaro and the road-builders. One leads to stagnation, the other to godhood. The fact that there *is* a choice is in itself already proof that destiny is not externally determined but is the direct result of one's willed attempt to transcend inherited limitations. If nothing is predestined, then destiny can only ultimately be self-authored:

> If people think that God or Nature has made the world as it is, they will tend to consider their fate inevitable. But if the Being of the world that they inhabit is only the result of the contingent discourses and vocabularies that constitute it, they will tolerate their fate with less patience and will stand a better chance of becoming *political* 'strong poets.'[33]

Like Lacan's subject of drive, Laclau's political strong poet (also referred to as 'constructor of the world'[34]) is not dissimilar to Okri's god. The three are, in a sense, one and the same. To be either one of them is to have traversed the fantasy and adopted an attitude of thought that rejects closure (of which predestination is a prime example) in favour of the endless journey towards "the freeing of human beings through a more assertive image of their capacities."[35]

In equating destiny with agency and in placing agency back within the self, Okri already departs quite radically from the standard indigenous African conception of predestination. In Yoruba and Igbo cosmologies, destiny is always already determined before re-birth. It is believed that before a person is born, the soul will meet with God (Olorun, the Yoruba Sky God and God of Destiny; Chi Ukwu, the Igbo Supreme God). It is then given the opportunity to finalize its destiny or 'lifeplan' (*ori* in Yoruba; *chi* in Igbo), which encompasses life-span, identity, attributes and talents, including the manner in which it wishes to utilize these qualities.[36] The entire process is highly complicated.

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[33] Ernesto Laclau, "Community and its Paradoxes: Richard Rorty's 'Liberal Utopia'," in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991): 97.

[34] Laclau, *New Reflections*, 189.

[35] Laclau, "Community and its Paradoxes," 97–98.

[36] See Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje*, 18; and Thomas Lawson, *Religions in Africa* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984): 68.

Not only must the soul debate the merits and limitations of its aspirations with its spiritual double (its alter ego or ancestral spirit, who resides in heaven) in order to win its support and approval, it also has to present a reasonable and detailed request to God in a humble manner or risk having it rejected.[37] Once the terms are agreed upon and the contract is sealed, the soul is reborn in the world of the living, with its memory of its *ori* erased. The newborn amnesiac has then to rediscover the river of its destiny, often through consultation with the divining oracle. Although destiny is preordained before birth, it is not entirely unchangeable. The individual's life-span cannot be extended, but can be shortened by suicide, offended deities, or evil magic cast by one's enemies. Similarly, the blessings of one's *ori* cannot be enhanced, but can be 'spoilt' or reduced through witchcraft or the non-observance of certain taboos. Should a bad or incompatible *ori* be chosen, or if the spiritual double refuses to endorse the *ori*, the individual will be unlucky in life. Not only will bad things come to him, he will also bring bad luck to his relatives and associates. The most that a person with a bad *ori* can do is to make continuous sacrifices to his ancestral spirits and deities so as to prevent his bad *ori* from being fully realized. A person with a good *ori* will, on the other hand, find good things coming to him with less effort. This does not mean that he will automatically receive all the blessings of a good *ori*. He is still required to work hard to bring the potentialities of his *ori* to fruition, cultivate a good character, and protect his *ori* from spoilage by performing sacrifices.

Here, then, lies the crucial difference between Okri's and the traditional conception of destiny. Although the latter is a combination of predestiny and free will, the extent to which an individual may liberate himself is always already irrevocably determined by his *ori*. This in contrast to Okri, for whom there is no ceiling to self-transcendence, which is equivalent to saying that destiny is ultimately determined by the subject himself. Notice that Okri neither fully abjures the African belief system nor fully embraces it. What he does is to borrow and adapt aspects of indigenous beliefs, including the *abiku* logic, into his world-view, which he defines as his "own philosophy, but part of the African aesthetic."[38] Okri's recasting of the African belief system is one of the reasons why it is important to emphasize a metonymic rather than a literal linking of the *abiku* trilogy to Nigeria. The universe of the texts does not always faithfully reflect the actual Nigerian life-world. Despite the many parallels between the two, subtle but crucial variances are always present in the former.

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[37] See Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje*, **20**; and Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, **34**.

[38] Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," **6**.

Dad the Kynical Hero

The political strong poet in Okri is not a deluded optimist whose life is emblematic of the timeworn expression 'hope (for the good life) springs eternal.' Certainly, hope is in the equation, but it is not, as Okri emphasizes, "something one should *put* in there; it's something that emerges out of the sheer necessity of its place in the pantheon of human survival and the human spirit."[39] In any case, he says,

> One should be very, very serious when one is going to talk about hope. One has to know about the very hard facts of the world and one has to look at them and know how deadly and powerful they are before one can begin to think or dream oneself into positions out of which hope and then possibilities can come.[40]

Living alertly and rigorously without the crutches of illusions is, in Okri, the hallmark of godhood – illusions here designating, first, the comforting fictions we tell ourselves in order to avoid confronting the "ghosts and monsters that we all carry within us";[41] and secondly, the Big Other to whom we surrender responsibility for ourselves, because it is easier to be a victim of bad infinity than to be a self-responsible strong poet. Needless to say, until more of us rid ourselves of illusions, there will always be more victims than heroes. Laclau concedes that the hero of the new type is rare, but says that its creation is "absolutely necessary if our time is going to live up to its most radical and exhilarating possibilities."[42] The new hero may be rare, but one is already in the making in the *abiku* trilogy. Unlike the many faceless compound cynics who, although aware of the corruption around them, remain quiet or are cowed into being quiet, Azaro's earthy father, Dad, is a kynic who has neither inhibition when it comes to renouncing society's hypocrites, nor tolerance for the artificial limitations imposed on him by politics. He is something of a community conscience and a doctor of society, whose mad voice, with its sarcasm and "crude eloquence" (*IR* **24**), upsets the compound people because it disturbs their fantasy of being helpless casualties of oppression. Like Diogenes of Sinope (the Greek proto-kynical philosopher) and Till Eulenspiegel (the fourteenth-century German peasant clown), Dad draws no boundary between

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[39] Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," **49**.

[40] Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers*, **88**.

[41] Okri, in Blishen, *Ben Okri with Edward Blishen*.

[42] Laclau, "Community and its Paradoxes," **98**.

theory and praxis. Being wretchedly poor and illiterate does not stop him from being

> an enlightener of the crude sort who is not intimidated even by thrashings [...] He embodies a robust intelligence that does not censor its impulses. He stands, like all kynics, halfway between the impudent and the spontaneous, between the naive and the artful, and because he oscillates so ambivalently between honesty and nastiness with his vulgar assent, conventional morality does not have an easy time with him.[43]

In addition to possessing the above kynical characteristics, Dad is also a feared and fearless boxer, with a powerful and masculine physique to boot. With this unwieldy combination of irrepressible kynicism and killer fists, Dad quickly becomes a headache for the self-assured political swindlers who feign respectability, not unlike the way in which Diogenes stumped Athenian elites when he demonstrated Plato's theory of eros by masturbating in public, or when he went about the streets with a lantern during the day claiming to be looking for an honest man and complaining that he could not find one. The *abiku* trilogy provides countless examples of Dad's kynical bite. Consider, for instance, Dad's unrestrained treatment of his creditors in *TFR* following a feast thrown to celebrate Azaro's safe return from one his many solitary wanderings. Soon after the party, the creditors start demanding payment for the loan Dad had taken to purchase more drinks for the party guests (including, ironically enough, the creditors themselves). Failing to extract money from Mum in Dad's absence, they throw stones at her and seize the family's furniture. When Dad returns and learns of the creditors' actions, he goes on the rampage, sending the guilty parties scurrying for cover with the roar of his voice:

> "They are hiding now behind their wives' wrappers and yet in broad daylight they THREATENED my WIFE and SON and STOLE ALL MY THINGS! They are RATS COWARDS THIEVES AND ROGUES. Let them come out and DENY it!" (*TFR* **97**)

Two community elders emerge to calm Dad but they are rebuffed. A husband and wife are heard quarrelling somewhere in the compound. After a moment of silence, a door opens and one of the creditors tiptoes out to return an item he had stolen from Mum. When he tries to slink home, Dad suddenly appears and gives him an earful: "Money will kill you […] You drank of my beer, ate

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[43] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, **142**.

of my food, and because of a small amount of money you behave like a rat?" (*TFR* **98**). As further illustration of Dad's kynicism, consider how he demonstrates that "the head has not only ears to hear and obey but also a brow with which to menacingly defy the stronger."[44] Dad, it should be remembered, "has got a strong head" (*TFR* **407**). When interrogated by thugs from the Party of the Rich about the party he supports, he asks them to mind their own business. Pressed for an answer, he tells them bluntly that he does not support their party, because "it is a party of thieves" (**255**).

Dad is not the only poor man contemptuous of the Party of the Rich. The compound people, too, are no strangers to the ways of the party, which once, to great comical effect, let slip the truth through the loudhailer: "WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE BRING YOU ELECTRICITY AND BAD ROADS, NOT GOOD MILK. I MEAN GOOD ROADS, NOT BAD MILK" (*TFR* **153**). Few of them, however, rarely ever risk standing their ground and publicly opposing the party thugs. Their apprehension is not unfounded. Although they may not fully fathom the sweeping changes that politics has brought to the country, they are acutely aware that the brave are liable to end up badly beaten or dead, as Ade's carpenter father discovers too late when he is killed and left to rot in the open. Terrorized into submission, some of them have learned that, for reasons of self-preservation, it would be safer and easier to tolerate tyranny, support the party they know is corrupt, and reap the rewards of patronage while at it. As a direct consequence of the way they *act* and regardless of their cynical knowledge, the politicians' manufactured reality, which the cynics are cynical about, is reinforced and becomes more real than it would otherwise. This, despite the ironic distance they continue to maintain towards the reality imposed on them by rival political parties. In a perverse way, then, the cynics get precisely what they seek: *self*-preservation – the preservation of their identity as political victims.

Dad, on the other hand, is consistently portrayed throughout the trilogy as a fiercely proud man whose most glaring faults are, from the standpoint of the Party of the Rich, his obstinate refusal to be bought and his insistence on saying all kinds of politically seditious things. When the women at Madame Koto's bar talk about the infinite wealth and power that the people will receive from the Party of the Rich, Dad silences them with "Rubbish!" (*TFR* **296**). And when the landlord threatens to increase the rent if he does not vote for the Party of the Rich, Dad provocatively goes around the compound telling everyone that he would not vote for the landlord's party even if they killed him. Fearing the omnipresent ears of the landlord's spies, Mum tries to get Dad to

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[44] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, **103**.

tone down, without much success. In his usual dramatic vein, Dad announces loudly, "What right has the landlord to bully us, to tell us who to vote for, eh? Is he God? Even God can't tell us who to vote for. Don't be afraid. We may be poor, but we are not slaves" (203). Dad is resolutely against the Party of the Rich, but he is not unaware of the rot in the Party of the Poor, the party he supports. When Ade's carpenter father tries to convince Dad that the Party of the Poor is "as corrupt as everyone else," Dad replies, "Still, I support them. At least they don't spit on us […] at least they think of the ordinary hard-working man" (*TFR* 211–12). Dad is, however, to learn the full extent of the Party of the Poor's treachery in *SOE*. After Ade's rampaging father is murdered by Madame Koto's thugs from the Party of the Rich, the Party of the Poor astonishes everyone by decreeing that no one in the area must bury the corpse, unless they were the murderers (*SOE* 247). By using the corpse as political capital against its political rival, the Party of the Poor is already committing a 'spiritual' crime against Ade's father. This is because, in African indigenous belief, a person whose dead body is not buried with due and correct rites "will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence."[45] Since no one from the compound wants to be accused of being a murderer, the body remains unburied, rotting near the bushes. Their inaction literally condemns the spirit of Ade's father to wander aimlessly until Dad, defying the Party of the Poor's decree, gives the body a proper burial. Dad's heroic action is to earn him jail time in *IR*.

In the trilogy, Dad is portrayed as neither a superhero immune to the stings of suffering nor a joyless moralist who sees evil everywhere. He is much more multi-faceted than one would normally expect from a figure whose name (rather, namelessness) "Dad" is suggestive of a cardboard everyman. We see how fragile he can be when Mum nearly dies during an illness. He loses his bearing and combative fervour, and turns into "a giant who was lost" (*TFR* 58–59). In *SOE*, he becomes "a giant destroyed by the sun" (*SOE* 34) when Mum abandons him because of his demon-incited lust for Helen, "a stinking beggar girl with a goat's eye" (16). In his lighter moments, however, Dad can be affably mad. In an earthy and sensuous way, he displays a robust sense of the ridiculous, an amusing trait Azaro appears to have inherited. Recall, for instance, Dad's child-like gregariousness at a thanksgiving party thrown for Azaro. To the cheering of an appreciative crowd, Dad, with an eagle feather sticking out from the back of his bandaged head, jokes, tells

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[45] Idowu, Emanuel Bolanji, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973): 174.

riddles, falls into impersonations, dances, beats a tune out on a bottle, and sings in a powerful voice to the music of his invention. At one point, when the women are singing in their village-choir voices, Dad mischievously taps at his glass with a spoon and spoils their rhythm (*TFR* **41**– **44**). For all his kynical fire and child-like mischievousness, however, Dad is at heart a poet-philosopher who knows too well the very hard facts of the world. In what is arguably one of the most poignant, life-affirming moments in *TFR*, Dad implores Azaro, who, having willed himself to die, is just a breath away from exiting the world of the living for good:

> My son, my only son […] We are poor. We have little to give you, but our love. You came out of our deepest joy. We prayed for you. We wanted you […] You have wept for us and watered the tree of love. We have suffered for you. Suffering is our home. We did not make this strange bed that we have to sleep on. But this world is real. I have bled in it. So have you […] We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruits of time. We are precious, and one day our suffering will turn into wonders of the earth […] Do you not see the mystery of our pain? That we bear poverty, are able to sing and dream sweet things. (*TFR* **337**–**38**)

Aside from revealing the poetic dimension of his character, Dad's melancholic entreaty also plays an obvious but crucial narrative function in bringing Azaro back from near-death, which in turn allows us uninterrupted access to the narrative universe in the trilogy. Just as important to note about Dad's supplication is the consummate optimism of his vision for the future. It is the same kind of optimism that Dad, with irrepressible fervour, attempts to instil in others from the compound so that they too can perceive political possibilities in impossibilities:

> We must take an interest in politics […] We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at ourselves differently. We are freer than we think […] Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. (*TFR* **498**)

If Dad's political vision is 'insane', the content of the vision is even more so. To the bewilderment of those around him, Dad proposes that mosquitoes be trained as international spies, and flies as messengers (*SOE* **122**). Less outrageously, he conjures up an image of a country in which everyone will receive the highest education, with music and mathematics as compulsory subjects (*TFR* **409**). He vows to build universities for beggars and proposes that the people be taught, among other things, the art of concentration and the numerous philosophies of the land. As well, he plans to introduce special

taxes on illiterates (*SOE* 122). Dad's imaginings may be silly and humorous but the humour is nonetheless serious, because, as Edna Aizenberg has noted, it "affirms the power of [the] mind to stretch, to assume responsibility, and to effect change."[46]

Belief Before Belief

As fascinating as Dad's political vision of the impossible is, it cannot be denied that it gets almost no support from the compound people. The dilemma he faces in convincing others to subscribe to and actively *live* the belief in possibilities in impossibilities lies in the fact that no hard proof can be produced to substantiate the truth of the belief. For that reason, he is viewed as a dreamy buffoon by those whose welfare he dementedly tries to uplift. Dad's inextinguishable optimism reminds us of Okri, whose writings demonstrate remarkable optimism about humanity's immense potential in the face of the "enshrined injustices of the world" (*TFR* 3). Although there is no ultimate guarantee of the truth of his belief, Okri continues to believe that there is an "immutable star" within each of us, a forgotten capacity to "give birth to [our] true self" (488). He has consistently returned to this central idea in all his writings from *TFR* onwards. In the poem "Time to be Real," for instance, he lyricizes the passing of "The illusion of our lesser selves / To the reality of our greater selves," the latter described as:

> What we sometimes suspect we are
> What we glimpse we are when in love,
> Magnificent and mysterious beings
> Capable of creating civilisations
> Out of the wild lands of the earth
> And the dark places in our consciousness.[47]

Like Dad's, Okri's ideas are often regarded by detractors as unintelligible or dreamy.[48] This is not surprising, since, in this age of diffuse cynicism and transgressive excesses where many things have lost their shock-value, there are arguably few left who would, having been schooled in reality, allow them-

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[46] Edna Aizenberg, "*The Famished Road*: Magical Realism and the Search for Social Equity," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 43 (1995): 29.

[47] Okri, *Mental Fight*, 5.

[48] See, for instance, Alev Adil's negative review of Okri's *ATG* in "More Narnian than Olympian," *Times Literary Supplement* (10 March 1995): 23; and Hattersley's comments on critics' dismissal of Okri in "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," 6.

selves to believe in something as 'naive' as Okri's idea of the "immutable star," lest they be taken for suckers. From Okri's point of view, it is precisely because cynicism is so pervasive that our consciousness has become "humiliated" to the point where we overlook our inner capacity to go beyond ourselves.[49] And it is precisely for this reason that we must rethink our everyday, pragmatic, cynical approach to life. Echoing the Kantian injunction *Du kannst, denn du sollst!* ('You can, because you must!'), which makes no consideration of the limitations imposed upon us by reality, Okri seems to be saying that we can overcome the humiliation of our consciousness because we must; otherwise, what hope is there for any of us in this world?

Certainly, to convince the cynic of the existence of his greater self requires more than hard proof, in the same way that it takes more than rational argumentation to convince a racist to give up his racist beliefs, or an infidel to embrace Islam, Christianity, and so on. That is because Okri's "immutable star" is not an object that lies romantically dormant within each of us. Rather, it is real only if we first act as if it is real. To explain this paradox of "belief before belief,"[50] we first need to examine the logic of belief. Žižek has argued that, contrary to our everyday assumption, we do not believe in something after we are convinced by some infallible proof of its truth. Rather, we find reasons attesting to our belief *because* we already believe, without being conscious that we hold that belief. Belief is independent of knowledge; it only needs to presuppose that its guarantor ('hard proof', confirmatory knowledge) is out there, even though "this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present *in persona*."[51] Proof of our belief, however, is always already externalized, borne witness by our actions. To quote Žižek, belief is "radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective" customs that we follow.[52] The fact that we follow a custom is already proof of our inner belief in the authority of that custom. This remains true even if the custom remains incomprehensible to us or if we continue to maintain a cynical distance from it. The implication here is not that our factual behaviour directly conditions the content of our belief. Rather, our external activity is that which provides material support for our unconscious belief. If and when we become conscious of our belief, the conversion would merely be a "formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed."[53] The radical exteriority of the unconscious is

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[49] Okri, *Mental Fight*, **5**.
[50] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **40**.
[51] Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, **108**.
[52] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **34**.
[53] *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **40**

similarly discernible in the domain of politics. As we have discussed, the subject is ideologically 'seized' precisely when he *acts* as if he does not know the falsity of an ideological proposition, as if it were possible to escape interpellation simply by maintaining a cynical, mute distance towards the ideology in question.

Here we can already appreciate why in Okri the "immutable star" or the "greater self" is real only if we first *act* as if (we believe) it is real. By unquestioningly submitting ourselves to the belief, as Dad does, and by imitating the ways of those who have 'moved mountains', belief will come by itself and, along with it, the positive effects that could only materialize themselves through the act of belief. The logic is not so strange as it may sound. Recall the road-builders' metaphoric pursuit of their greater selves which Okri depicts as a pursuit of Heaven. The road-builders 'know' that Heaven does not exist out there. But because they continue to presuppose its existence and act as if Heaven not only exists but is within reach, they already 'objectively' believe. This remains true irrespective of what they consciously know or think is the significance of their pursuit. If and when the road-builders recognize the truth of the impossibility of their pursuit, the conversion would merely be a formal act of giving a name to what they have unconsciously believed in all along: the existence of their greater selves.

The Authentic Act

On Okri's notion of the "greater self," we could say that its actualization requires a certain blind faith on the part of the subject and, more importantly, a leap of faith. All leaps of faith or ventures into the feared unknown invariably involve a minimum of risk, of bringing about some major catastrophe as a result of the transgression. From within the horizon of what precedes the leap, the leap "always and by definition appears as a change 'from Bad to Worse'."[54] On the face of this, the proper heroism is not to hold on to the Bad but to fully assume the Worse. We see this exemplified by the flamenco dancer in Okri's essay "Beyond Words: A Secular Sermon." Wounded by someone who alluded that she has no *duende* ('fire'), the dancer knows that "she has to dance her way past her limitations, and that this may destroy her forever."[55] With ritual slowness, she begins her dance, stamps fire into her loins, and takes herself apart before the audience's sceptical gaze:

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[54] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, **377**.

[55] Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, **9**.

> She is disintegrating, shouting and stamping and dissolving the boundaries of her body. Soon she becomes a wild unknown force, glowing in her death, dancing from her wound, dying in her dance.
>
> And when she stops – strangely gigantic in her new fiery stature – she is like one who has survived the most dangerous journey of all.[56]

The outcome of heroism is always radically undecidable. The flamenco dancer, for example, does not know if she will succeed in surpassing herself and, in doing so, prove her critics wrong. It is very possible that she might fail. If she does, her credibility will be irreparably destroyed. Fully aware of the risk, she nonetheless decides that she cannot not do it. She starts off slowly and soon blazes as if "something in her more than her" has suddenly seized control to propel her to a new level of the possible. The flamenco dancer's performance is what Žižek would term an "authentic act."[57] An authentic act is not just any action performed to achieve or avoid something. Rather, it is an act which, although performed by the subject, surprises even the subject performing the act. Paradoxically, although the act is not intentional in the usual sense of being consciously willed, "it is nevertheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible – I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it."[58] Furthermore, the act, if successful, always leads to a 'miraculous' symbolic death and rebirth. Okri's flamenco dancer blazes into a "new fiery stature […] shining in celebration of her own death,"[59] in the same way that the Lacanian subject of desire is transformed into the subject of drive, re-created *ex nihilo*, when he traverses his fantasy. The lesson provided by the dancer here applies equally to Okri's politics: the act always leads to a radical rewriting of the rules of the game. It

> redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible', yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility).[60]

In *TFR*, the main agent of the authentic act is, unsurprisingly, Dad. Encouraged by the countless number of political thugs and creditors he has fought off

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[56] *Birds of Heaven*, 10.
[57] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 374.
[58] *The Ticklish Subject*, 376.
[59] Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, 10.
[60] Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London & New York: Verso, 2000): 121.

with his kynicism and fists, Dad – who used to box and wrestle before moving to the city ghetto – decides to embark on a side-career in boxing to make some money from bets. Calling himself Black Tyger, Dad starts to train dementedly, and it is during one of his solitary training sessions that he performs his first of three authentic acts in *TFR*. Out of the darkness of the night, a man who goes by the name of Yellow Jaguar emerges out of the blue to challenge Dad. (Dad is to realize later that Yellow Jaguar is the spirit of a famous boxer who died some years ago.) Black Tyger accepts and they fight, raining blows on one another and falling into puddles. Towards the end, Dad is pulverized by a hail of ceaseless punches from his opponent. Just when defeat appears imminent, something unexpected happens:

> Dad rose miraculously in stature. And with all the concentrated rage and insanity of those who have a single moment in which to choose between living and dying, Dad broke the chains of exhaustion and thundered such blows on the man as would annihilate an entire race of giants. (*TFR* **357**)

Unable to withstand the blows, Yellow Jaguar crumbles and promptly disappears into the earth. Victory leaves the seriously wounded Dad in a state of subjective and physical destitution. He literally loses himself in agony and amnesia. Like "the biggest newborn baby in the world," he drools, farts indiscriminately, sleeps like a baby and has to be fed pap (*TFR* **359**). But on the seventh day he makes a miraculous recovery. He is reborn with "fresh energies" (**363**), "interesting powers and a kind of madness" (**364**). If Dad's first symbolic death and rebirth gives him a new burning enthusiasm to train harder, his second transforms him on a deeper level. After a fierce boxing match with the menacing Green Leopard, which seems to have dislodged something in his brain, he begins to talk about "becoming a politician and bringing freedom and prosperity to the world and free education to the poor" (*TFR* **408**). With unselfconscious exuberance, he goes around the compound in earnest to canvass support, persisting even when he is verbally abused and doors are slammed in his face. Despite his illiteracy, books become a new priority. In his speeches, visions of political miracles are conjured and the people chastized "for not thinking for themselves," for their "sheep-like philosophy, their tribal mentality, their swallowing of lies, their tolerance of tyranny, [and] their eternal silence in the face of suffering" (**420**). Because of his enhanced determination in fighting poverty and injustice, Dad has been compared to the

Yoruba gods Shango and Ogun.[61] In Yoruba cosmology, Shango is the feared god of thunder who, "when he spoke, fire came out of his mouth,"[62] while Ogun stands for "justice, the justice of the gods and the justice required in human action."[63]

If Dad's second transformation (authentic act, symbolic death, re-creation *ex nihilo*) brings about a conversion whereby he formally becomes the political strong poet he has always informally been since his early days as a headstrong kynic, the third transformation marks his ultimate traversal of fantasy and the metamorphosis of the very kernel of his being. Destroyed and bed-ridden for days after a near-fatal duel with the man in a white suit, Dad suddenly arises one evening "from the bed as from death" (*TFR* **497**). With his wounds healed, despair deepened, and spirit strengthened, Dad is no longer the same man: "I am converted – I am blinded – I am beginning to see" (**499**). (In the next chapter, we will see that this transformation in Dad is to lead to the crystallization of his hitherto partly-formed political vision for Africa's liberation.) Thereafter, the beggars previously adopted by Dad as his "world constituents" (*TFR* **419**) become even more central to his politics. They are fed, looked after and promised social upliftment through education so that they would no longer be deceived and treated like children by the corrupt and the powerful. Dad gets so carried away by his obsession with the beggars' welfare that his own family is neglected, and Mum, exasperated beyond words, is (temporarily) given into Madame Koto's circle of influence. His 'irrational' act of prioritizing the welfare of the downtrodden over his own is not, as it might appear, a 'stupid' act of sabotaging his own life. Bearing the hallmarks of the psychoanalytic notion of the authentic act, it is, rather, an act that allows Dad to over-identify directly with the ideology of shared prosperity (cynically propagated by the political parties to win votes), to the point where he literally hijacks it. This is, in an extreme sense, precisely what Okri's politics demands. To enjoy shared prosperity, one should not just talk about it or expect simply to share the prosperity of others. One should, above all, share one's own and, in doing so, concretely demonstrate that man is or can be god to man.[64] Dad shows this by making no distinction between theory and practice. Through his actions, he demonstrates to the powers-that-be the ethical way in which power ought to be exercised, not for obscene self-enrichment but towards

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[61] See Quayson, "Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System."

[62] Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, **44**.

[63] Lawson, *Religions in Africa*, **62**.

[64] Ben Okri, "Plea for Somalia," *Guardian* (London; **3** September **1992**).

the uplifting of the welfare of the people – the impoverished compound-dwellers, including himself, Mum and Azaro, who are all only one socio-economic step away from becoming beggars themselves.

The logic and moral of Dad's authentic act is embedded in a parable he tells Azaro about the good man and the evil mosquito. "There was once a man who suffered all the bad things that can happen to a human being," Dad recounts (*SOE* 44). Everything precious to him had been taken away. His son died, his house burned down, the wife left him, his boss gave him the sack and, while he was crossing the road, a cow kicked him in the face. On top of that, he fell ill and was close to death. Instead of cursing his fate, the man bore his bad fortune with fortitude. Out of nowhere, a mosquito appeared before him with an irresistible offer: Stop being a good man and you will not only live but gain all the wealth and luck one can only dream of possessing; refuse and you will die the next morning. The man rejected the mosquito's offer and set off to perform more good deeds in one night than in his entire life. The next morning, the mosquito returned. To its astonishment, the man said that he was not afraid to die: "I have given them my life. I used to be one. Now, I am many. They will become more. How many of us can you kill? The more you kill, the more we will become" (*SOE* 46). If we accept that Dad is the unlucky man in the story who refuses to sell his soul, then we would also have to reject the claim that "Dad never really meets politics head-on,"[65] or that Okri is "more introspective, more personal [and] less radical, than Achebe and his peers."[66] We would have to conclude that Dad *is* political – not in the naive sense of being a superhero who single-handedly changes the world, but, rather, in his capacity as what Fredric Jameson terms a "vanishing mediator,"[67] or, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's less romantic terms, "manure of the future."[68] Like Ade, he is a catalyst who paves the way for others after him to carry on the struggle. Similarly, we would have to conclude that Okri, through his portrayal of Dad, is in fact 'terroristically' political, since he goes a step *beyond* the kind of intervention that operates within the framework of existing sociopolitical

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[65] Maggi Phillips, "Storytellers, Shamans and Clowns: Postcolonial Engagement with the Supra-Human in the Novels of R.K. Narayan, Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northern Territory University, Darwin, 1996): 167.

[66] Niven, "Achebe and Okri: Contrasts in the Response to Civil War," 282.

[67] Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986*, vol. 2: *The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988).

[68] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 182.

relations. His brand of creative politics is the "art of the impossible,"[69] a politics that seeks to change the very parameters of the 'possible' in the existing constellation.

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[69] Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, **43**.

4 *Songs of Enchantment*

Mathematics of Destiny

WHERE *TFR* CLOSES ON AN ELEVATED NOTE, *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*) opens to a portentous future. As if to remind us of the impossibility of completion and to caution us against hastily equating Dad's transformations in the first book of the trilogy with 'arrival', Azaro says early in *SOE* that nothing is ever finished and struggles are never truly concluded. With his *abiku* foresight, he reveals that the political chaos brought on by the coming independence is fast spreading. It is already amidst the compound people, "waiting to burst into flames" and destroy lives (*SOE* **3**). Children will die from water poisoning. Around the country, dissension will grow fat and many who have hitherto opposed the corrupt Party of the Rich will succumb to accepting its patronage. They will be defeated by hunger, unable to wait any longer for justice to come. Ade will die in a car crash and his father will go insane and be killed by thugs from the Party of the Rich. Madame Koto will be stabbed (but her death postponed until *IR*) and countless other calamities will befall the nation-people before *SOE* runs its course. Interestingly, although the unborn nation is fast disintegrating in *SOE*, Okri does not see it as a "dark" novel:

> My books that seem to be books of light are actually books of despair, and I always say that, with the passing of time, *Astonishing the Gods*, which is seen as the book of light, will grow darker, and a book like *Songs of Enchantment*, which is seen as a dark book, will grow lighter. It will change over time.[1]

Okri offers no elaboration on how *SOE* might be seen as growing lighter in time, but the answer is already implicit in our earlier explication of the 'twisted' logic of the impossible: 'the greater the lack, the more there is to

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[1] Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," **49**.

overcome, and the more levels of self-transcendence there are to achieve'. Darkness is light in the same way that every failure is a secret victory, a prepared ground for the active re-invention of a higher order. In the context of *SOE*, we might say that the darkness overshadowing the lives of the compound people is a prelude to the emergence of a higher political order. This "mathematics of destiny,"[2] the way in which things will somehow work out for those who persevere when the time is right, applies as much to the trilogy as it does to Nigeria and Africa.

"Things peak at different times for different people," says Okri.[3] "Africa has gone through its own stage of civilisation a thousand years ago and gone into a decline. It's like Greece." Elsewhere, Okri has suggested a reason for the decline of a civilization: "It's possible that one has been travelling on one road for too long."[4] As a result, one has forgotten the reason for travelling. Forgetting, as we know from the road-builders in *TFR*, is the first step towards decline. Applying this logic to postcolonial Africa, it might be said that the people's challenge to stay alive (within the global economic system) and to stay intact (as a nation in a world divided by ethnonationalist upsurges) need not extend into bad infinity. Similarly, the prevalent image of Africa as a perpetually starving and naturally backward continent "inhabited not by human beings but by a monstrous variation of black insects" (*IR* 203) cannot be said to be the culmination of the continent's destiny. Nor can it be said that Africa's present decline suggests, as "contemporary peakers" believe, that its people "never had a peak" and that "all they had was dark ages."[5] Okri laments people's general tendency to overlook Africa's resilience of spirit and overemphasize the negative impact of colonialism. Is it not possible, Okri asks, that colonialism did not penetrate the kernel of Africa, "our spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world"?[6] Of course, he says, the "African ways have their flaws" and colonialism had been "a hugely negative thing in many ways – particularly its effect on the self-perception of the people."[7] It made them see themselves as less than what they were. But does that mean that the damage is irreparable or

[2] Okri, in Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," 46.

[3] Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," 6.

[4] Martin Linton, "Dreams of Utopia on Road to Reform," *Guardian* (London; 4 November 1991).

[5] Okri, in Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," 6.

[6] Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers*, 86.

[7] Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," 6.

that Africa's resilience is less worthy of attention in comparison to its brief nightmare of colonization?

Okri's contestation of the metanarrative of the West as the privileged agent of history and the bearer of light to Africa is not a new enterprise. Others before him have asked whether scholars, including even well-meaning Africanist historiographers and anthropologists, have not themselves perpetuated the distorted image of the continent in their haste to grasp and explain away its failures. Similarly, the relationship between colonizer and colonized has been debated ever since Senghor, Fanon, and Memmi. Much of this has been discussed elsewhere, so, to avoid needless repetition, this short chapter will limit its focus to just one question: where does Okri sit in this familiar landscape? We might begin by noting that, in spite of evident postcolonial concerns in his writings, Okri himself is not keen on the label. He states emphatically in an interview:

> I reject utterly the way in which my work is placed within the whole context of the margin, the periphery, postcolonial and stuff like that. I think those are very poor descriptions of the work that some of us are trying to do. Because it completely situates the work within a time/historical context and not within the context of the self and inner necessity, which is bigger and beyond that. And there are affinities between writers that have more to do with that than they have to do with the fact that they both come from so-called ex-colonial nations. When people do that they're not seeing what I'm doing and they're completely missing the point and I feel sad about that.[8]

Here one might perhaps be tempted to read Okri's self-distancing from the "postcolonial and stuff like that" with a pinch of salt. After all, according to the standard cynical view, writers almost never fail to bemoan the ways in which their works are misunderstood, which is reason enough to treat their outbursts as a kind of writerly posturing that ultimately has little if any bearing on the writings themselves. It is true that writers sometimes overlook the textuality of their texts, except that here Okri's texts *are* at odds with certain textbook prescriptions of postcolonial theorizing. Negritude, for instance, is usually dismissed as a 'stupid', even racist, essentialist myth, a defensive-reactionary appeal to some ahistorical essence that does not exist. But is it nothing but a self-defeating response to colonialism, an attempt to cover up Africa's inferiority complex and the shame of its colonizability? Could it, instead, be a kind of 'necessary lie' to be used to "free us from our smallness"

[8] Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," **44**.

and "help us get to our true reality"?[9] These are some of the key issues we will be examining in relation to Okri's endeavour to revalidate Africa's relationship with the rest of the world.

The African Way

In *SOE*, as in *TFR*, Dad continues to propound in the same feverish style his fantastic political visions and the novel ways in which he is "going to rule this country" (**119**). But it is in *SOE*, instead of *TFR*, that his visions attain density and historical-contextual specificity. Consider, for example, the episode set in Madame Koto's bar where Dad is found sounding off his political ideas to Azaro and goes on for so long and so vigorously that Azaro, already growing edgy, is invaded by all kinds of insects. Although this scene is not much different from the others where Dad talks about wondrous political possibilities, it is particularly worth noting because Dad's ideals are for the first time explicitly referred to (by Azaro) as visions of an "African utopia," in which "we would pool all our secret wisdom, distil our philosophies, conquer our bad history, and make our people glorious in the world of continents" (**124**). Africa, continues Dad, "is the home of the world" that "could be the garden of the earth" (**126**). But "look at how we live in this world," he laments, pointing to all that is wrong with the continent. Dad's emphasis on Africa is amplified by Azaro's account of a momentous spirit-event secretly taking place amidst the nation's political chaos. With his *abiku* eyes, Azaro sights in the sky "the slow migration of the great spirits of Africa" (**26**). He is initially unable to comprehend what he sees, since what he sees appears locked and coded in gnomic riddles. It is only after a few sightings that he begins to understand that the innumerable great spirits of the continent and master-spirits from all over the world are "coming together for their mighty convocation" (**40–41**). They are trailed by "representatives of our forgotten gods, our transformative ancestors" (**159**), and behind them, representatives from the spirit-world who had lived

> The African Way – The Way of compassion and fire and serenity: The Way of freedom and power and imaginative life; The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living [...] The Way that preaches attunement with all the higher worlds, that believes in forgiveness and generosity of spirit, always receptive, always listening, always kindling the understanding of signs [...] The Way that

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[9] Okri, *Mental Fight*, **5**.

> always, like a river, flows into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world. (*SOE* 159–60)

From Azaro we learn that the African Way, also referred to as "the Original Way" (*SOE* 160), is a way of being in the world, a spiritual mode of existence through which "forgotten and undiscovered" ancestral knowledge was produced (161). Ancestral knowledge here encompasses

> legends and moments of history [...] wonderful forms of divination by numbers and cowries and signs, numerological systems for summoning the gods, [...] the stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativities of African Time and Space [...] astronomical incidents: the date of a stellar explosion, a supernova bursting over the intense dream of the continent, heralding, according to a king's soothsayer, a brief nightmare of colonization, and an eventual, surprising, renaissance. (*IR* 113–14)

There is certainly poetic beauty in Okri's description of the African Way, but his valorization of it nonetheless brings him dangerously close to the essentialist trap that Senghor is said to have fallen into when he promoted the much derided Pan-African philosophy of Negritude. Is Okri heading in the same direction as Senghor, ideationally? Is he advocating some kind of return to the idealized purity of precolonial Africa? To answer these questions, one should perhaps begin by noting that the most unfortunate thing about Negritude is that the popular view of its being theoretically suspect is also the most inaccurate. Negritude, which has many overlooked variants ranging from the aggressive to the conciliatory and inventive, has been rejected en bloc for relying on African blackness as justification for everything, for homogenizing the heterogeneous Africa, and for setting up false binaries: "Negro emotion confronting Hellenistic reason; intuitive Negro reasoning through participation facing European analytical thinking through utilization."[10] Negritude has also been criticized by the likes of Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, and Ezekiel Mphahlele as an unfortunate theory that romanticizes Africa, glosses over its ugly and violent side, and makes the black man look ridiculous by portraying him as having "insect antennas" and "mystic emotion."[11] Are these fair accusations? Let us examine two passages from Senghor's *On African Socialism*:

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[10] V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988): 94.

[11] Léopold Sédar Senghor, *On African Socialism*, tr. & intro. Mercer Cook (London & Dunmow: Pall Mall, 1964): 74.

> In contrast to the classic European, the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object; he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyze it. After holding it at a distance, after scanning it without analyzing it, he takes it vibrant in his hands, careful not to kill or fix it. He touches it, feels it, *smells* it.
> [...]
> Thus the Negro African [...] abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; he lives a symbiosis [...] he 'knows ["is born with"] the Other'. Subjects and objects are dialectically face to face in the very act of knowledge.[12]

Of the two passages, the first is clearly romantic. It paints the Negro African as a native endowed with the mythical ability to perceive secret interconnectivity between all things, and to experience harmonic oneness with the world. The second passage, by contrast, is not only perfectly reasonable but also, one is tempted to argue, Lacanian in implication: the Other is not external to the subject's identity but is intimately external or 'extimate'. The subject always by default misrecognizes the truth about this extimate relationship. That is why it is only when the subject abandons his personality (his *agalma*, what is most precious to him) to become identified with the Other (recognize that he has always already been the Author of his Fate), that he will be symbolically reborn in the place where the Other always already was (become a self-recognizing subject of drive). Reading the second passage from a Lacanian standpoint, we might also say that reality is not a pre-discursive object but something that has to be found "in the very act of knowledge,"[13] in the traversal of one's fundamental fantasy.

It is not mentioned often enough that Senghor was keenly aware of the hostile reception given his ideas. In defence of his position, he points out in "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century" that all he is saying is that Africa has gone through history in ways that are distinct from Europe, and that, because of these differences, Africa has come to possess certain historically conditioned and culturally encoded sensibilities which are neither irrelevant nor inferior simply because they differ from the European norm. The fundamentals of Senghor's vision are not lost on scholars like V.Y. Mudimbe who argue that the dominant view of Negritude as promoting false binarisms

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[12] Senghor, *On African Socialism*, **72–73**.
[13] *On African Socialism*, **73**.

"seems quite wrong."[14] Senghor's philosophy, Mudimbe argues, can be understood through a challenging proposition Senghor offered to the Senegalese Socialist Party in July **1963**: "Finally, what too many Africans lack, is the awareness of our poverty and creative imagination, I mean the spirit of resourcefulness."[15] Is this not also the same point Okri makes when he says that Africa should not overlook its resilience of spirit and great capacity to dream?

In the *abiku* trilogy, Okri not only insists on the resilience of the African Way, he also insists that those who attempt to negate it would only end up negating themselves. To borrow the words of the reformed Governor-General in *IR*, because imperialists "set out to dominate the world, they are condemned to live with the negative facts of their domination. They will be changed by the world that they set out to colonize" (*IR* **161**). This subversive logic of 'he who thinks he penetrates Africa is, unbeknownst to him, always already penetrated by it' (to adapt Lacan's 'the one who counts is always already included in the account') is nicely illustrated by Cezair–Thompson in her reading of the 'famished road' motif. Cezair–Thompson contrasts Okri's road of creation with the road in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. The latter, she argues, represents the path "which the colonizers impose upon Africa, and which symbolically appropriates the natives' rights to 'imagine' their own destiny, map their own terrain and tell their own story."[16] Okri's road, on the other hand, is mythic-creative in origin, created by no one, always transforming itself and elusive of all attempts to pin it down. It is perpetually hungry and ever ready to devour those who travel on it without first offering the proper sacrifices. In *TFR*, one of its victims is the white man in Mum's story. The white man in the tale was once an important figure in the colonial government of the unborn nation. When independence troubles started, he tried unsuccessfully for three years to leave the country. Even taking a plane out was futile; when he got off the plane, he found himself back in the same place. It was only later he discovered that "the only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (*TFR* **483**). The moral of Mum's story is this: the white man – representative of "short-sighted conquerors of the times' (*SOE* **160**) – may colonize the continent, extract its riches and wreak havoc upon it, but ultimately it is he who is swallowed by Africa, as is Mr Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

If we concede that Okri's Senghorian African Way is not 'stupid' essentialism, how, then, does it compare to, say, the Asian Way, an ideology propoun-

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[14] Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, **94**.

[15] Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, **94**.

[16] Cezair–Thompson, "Beyond the Postcolonial Novel," **35**.

ded by East Asian leaders like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad? How do they compare, beyond the fact that they reject the West's self-representation as the body of universal values and posit themselves as a way of healing the wounded psyches of their once-colonized people? One might note that the Asian Way, which asserts its particularity as a synthesis of 'ours' ('Asian values') and 'theirs' (Western capitalist-economic rationalism), is in the last instance a cynical ideology strategically employed by the political class in East Asia to restrict civil rights, inculcate blind obedience to authority, cover up corrupt practices and perpetuate existing relations of oppression. It is a kind of reverse racism constituted strictly on the basis of pure difference, whereby any transaction between self and Other can only occur with the former being perpetually tormented by a deep fear of being contaminated by the Other or robbed of its superior indigenous Thing. By contrast, Okri's African Way is closer to another Way: namely, that developed by Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel *Two Thousand Seasons*, insofar as they both aim at "preserving knowledge of who we are, knowledge of the best way we have found to relate to each other, each to all, ourselves to other peoples, all to our surroundings."[17] The crucial difference is that Okri's Way is not, like Armah's Way and the Asian Way, a particularity posited in a purely differential relation with other particularities. Although it has its distinctive, culturally and historically shaped expressions (forms, divinations, rituals, stories, myths, and so on), it does not close in upon itself or posit itself as the best or only Way, but "always, like a river, flows into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world" (*SOE* 160). Furthermore, although Okri's Way promises self-empowerment, it does not, like the aforementioned Ways, prescribe a return to ancestral practices for its own sake (as if Africans must only stick to doing African things if they aim to be empowered), or promote unquestioning deference to authority. What it simply asks of the subject is to "say yes to destiny and illumination" (*TFR* 487), to rekindle what Senghor refers to as Africa's "spirit of resourcefulness." Put another way, it asks that the subject replace his cynical-defeatist attitude of thought with one that keeps the mind open to possibility in impossibility, in self-transcendence and nation-building.

To clarify this with an illustration, we might imagine the subject in search of healing via Okri's African Way as having to "make a parabolic journey" (*SOE* 281) to the presupposed other side where the Cure is believed to lie waiting. The twist here is that if and when the subject eventually makes the journey and crosses the threshold, he will discover that, contrary to what he

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[17] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973; London & Ibadan: Heinemann, 1979): 39.

had hitherto assumed, the Cure is not 'out there', external to himself, to be found in ancestral rituals or some such thing, but lies, rather, within himself. Rituals, if they are noble, are only there to help the subject cope with the "fire and ice of being born" (**131**) and to recognize that "OUR DESTINY IS [and has always been] IN OUR HANDS" (**279**). This perhaps explains the significance of the novel's title and the reason why Okri sees *SOE* as a book of light rather than darkness. *SOE* celebrates the enchantment and redivination of the self, and this celebration is made possible, ironically enough, by the powers that are attempting to negate it: namely, the corrupt political class of the would-be nation as well as "those whose hunger had been defeated by the promise of wealth and instant protection" and "who didn't want to suffer and wait for justice any more" (**111**). This is ultimately the same as saying that *SOE* 'celebrates' political strife – not by perversely revelling in it but in recognizing that it is, in the final account, a secret opportunity to surmount the seven mountains of life and, in doing so, surmount oneself.

All Things are Linked: Okri, Senghor and the Universal Civilization

Okri's African Way is but one of the many Ways flowing in and out of each other like the river of creation which became a road which then branched out to the whole world. In Okri's philosophy, all Ways flow into the great sea of humanity to constitute what he calls the "universal civilization."[18] This notion of "universal civilization" has not received as much scholarly attention as the *abiku* and famished-road motifs, but it is pivotal to, if not the culmination of, Okri's vision in which "All things are linked" (**483**). It is mentioned perhaps for the first time in his essay "Redreaming the World," where, by way of clearing the ground for the introduction of the term, he reminds contemporary victors not to forget the mathematics of destiny, that "to swallow the history of others into your own history is to expect to be constipated with the history of others."[19] To "strangled nations" and "wounded peoples," he asks them not to "hold themselves down with rage about their historical past or their intolerable present" but instead to find the humility and strength to distil their experience into the highest creativity. It is only when people recognize the logic of the rise and fall of things, Okri writes, that there may be hope "for us all to create the beginnings of the first true universal civilization in the history of recorded and unrecorded time." The idea surfaces next in Okri's essay "Time

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[18] Okri, "Redreaming the World."

[19] "Redreaming the World."

to Dream the Best Dream of All," where he urges the United Nations to commit itself steadfastly to its "universal goal": "the realisation of the human potential, the eradication of poverty, the enhancement of liberty, and the triumph of justice."[20] Despite the UN's shortcomings, Okri says, it is today "the only organisation still vaguely capable of articulating the notion of one world, a sort of symphony of humanity." It is not until *Astonishing the Gods* (*ATG*), though, that the notion receives its fullest treatment. From the allegorical novel, we learn that the dream of the Invisibles is to "initiate on earth the first universal civilisation where love and wisdom would be as food and air" (*ATG* 131), a place where

> the most ordinary goal was living the fullest life, in which creativity in all spheres of endeavour was the basic alphabet, and in which the most sublime lessons possible were always learned and relearned from the unforgettable suffering which was the bedrock of their great new civilisation. (*ATG* 28)

After *ATG*, 'universal civilization' is invoked in several other works. In his essay "The Joys of Story-Telling I," for instance, Okri reflects on the postmodern collapse of the great systems (in whose name nations and individuals have wreaked violence upon others), and how it is *celebrated* rather than mourned by strong poets, "albeit with some sadness in their hearts," because they know that the last remaining towers of certainty must collapse before "a true world history and genius" can begin.[21] Only then, he writes, "might the world hope as one and struggle as one, towards the first universal golden age."[22] In *IR*, the third book of the *abiku* trilogy, the notion surfaces as the "grand picture of humanity" (112–13), a composite of "the great jigsaw that the creator spread all over the diverse peoples of the earth, hinting that no one race or people can have the complete picture or monopoly of the ultimate possibilities of the human genius alone" (112).

Even from these few examples it is clear that the 'universal civilization' is a central constant in Okri's writings. What is perhaps not so evident is how much it recalls, if not has its roots in, Senghor's lesser-known Negritudist conception of the "Civilization of the Universal."[23] For Senghor, the universal

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[20] Ben Okri, "Time to Dream the Best Dream of All," *Guardian* (London; 7 January 1995).

[21] Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, 30.

[22] *A Way of Being Free*, 31.

[23] Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in *The Africa Reader: Independent Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970): 187–88.

civilization is the reconciled totality of the inherently *equal* parts of a divided but interdependent world. It is a pan-human order, to be achieved through a world-historical "dynamic symbiosis" wherein only the fecund elements of each part are retained and the harmful discarded.[24] Senghor also believes, rightly or wrongly, that Africa stands to benefit from "an infusion of the inquisitive spirit and a higher development of analytical reason," while "Western Europe, now locked in a dehumanizing worship of machines and material wealth, will benefit from the African contribution of its greater emotional and spiritual development, vitality, and understanding of the interconnectedness of all life in the universe."[25] Although there are essentialist moments in Senghor's conception here that would furrow the brows of postcolonial critics, it would serve us well not to throw out the baby (Senghor's attempt to validate Africa's place in the world) with the bathwater (his essentialist view of the inherent differences between the West and Africa). In any case, Okri, despite being influenced by Senghor, does not draw wholesale from him but radicalizes his ideas. For instance, where Senghor envisages the realization of the universal civilization as a distant but actual possibility,[26] Okri sees it more as an impossible ideal to be pursued but never to be fully attained, as attainment would only lead to the cessation of the infinite overcoming of self-limitations. Like the road-builders' Heaven in *ATG*, Okri's universal civilization is a transgressive utopia which, instead of insisting on arrival, celebrates process over product.

[24] Senghor, *On African Socialism*, **49–50**.

[25] Janet G. Vaillant, *Black, French and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, **1990**): **266**.

[26] Senghor rejects Jean–Paul Sartre's Marxist reading of Negritude, which argues that Africa's black cultural values will be cancelled out when the grand symbiosis of cultures occurs. Africa, he argues, will remain African, true to the culture of Negritude and the goal of African socialism which is to create a society in which the human personality can reach its potential.

5 *Infinite Riches*

The Third Cycle

As with *SOE*, *Infinite Riches* (*IR*), the third volume of the *abiku* trilogy, begins on a solemn note that anticipates the advent of some major calamity. In contrast to Azaro's opening lines in *SOE*, those that open *IR* are markedly 'unmagical', intimating that Dad is perhaps for the first time coming to realize that one man's consummate optimism and ceaseless struggles may not be enough to short-circuit the nation's *abiku* cycle of bad infinity:

> "Time is growing," […] "And our suffering is growing too. When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real?" (*IR* **5**)

The reader who has followed the *abiku* saga from its inception would, no doubt, growing a little restive, ask the same: will the people's positive dream of the would-be nation's flowering ever come true, or will the nation repeat *ad infinitum* the *abiku* cycle of bad infinity? As the nation enters the final stages of its birth-throes in *IR*, Dad will be arrested and imprisoned on suspicion of murder for daring to bury the rotting corpse of Ade's father. Mum, hitherto content to remain in the background, will temporarily step forward and overshadow Dad when she stumbles into national prominence as a radical political figure. Madame Koto, the seemingly invincible barwoman-turned-politician, will finally meet with her death, as Azaro has long predicted. And Jeremiah, the small-time photographer who disappears after he is brutalized in *TFR* by political thugs for taking incriminating pictures of reality and corruption, will reappear as a successful "international photographer" (*IR* **41**). On the political side of things, the infinitely postponed great political rally planned since *TFR* will finally take place, albeit with anti-climactic results. Future leaders will have dreamt of "nation-destroying policies in advance" (*IR* **11**), secret "economic pacts between the colonizer and the colonized" signed, and

the elections that will "seal the fate of the unborn nation" (**337**) forewon by an unnamed political party that publicly vows to let those who vote against it "EAT DUSTBINS" (**228**).

IR is decidedly bleak if approached directly. But if it is read in the light of Okri's logic of the impossible, we will see, or at least remind ourselves to see, that every failure is a secret victory, an opportunity for the people to re-invent a higher order and discover their "infinite riches." That is arguably the significance of the book's title, a phrase borrowed from Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* ("Infinite riches in a little room"). "Infinite riches" is synonymous with the "greater self" and the "immutable star"; all three refer to humanity's immense possibilities, the lost-forgotten wealth that the diverse people of the earth have to find before the "awesome picture […] of divinity, or humanity" can be completed (*IR* **162**). These pillar-concepts in Okri's philosophy – infinite riches, universal civilization, and the logic of the impossible – underpin *IR* as surely as they do *TFR* and *SOE*. What makes *IR* interestingly different from the first two books of the trilogy, though, is not so much Okri's revisiting of these pillar-concepts as its three unique features. First, it is by far the 'angriest' book in the trilogy; fiery in its treatment of colonial racism and the betrayal of the would-be nation by both the colonizer and the colonized. Second, *IR* is the most historically engaged of the three books, containing more concrete historical allusions than *TFR* and *SOE* combined to link the 'fictional' unborn nation to Nigeria. And third, it articulates a counter-hegemonic account of Nigeria's history of independence, an account which posits that Nigeria's textbook history was a reality Nigerians never lived. To flesh out these points, let us begin with an interrogation of the Governor-General, the highest-ranking queen's representative to the soon-to-be postcolonial nation, who, by virtue of his nefariousness, eclipses everyone else in the novel.

The Governor-General

An "Englishman with a polyp on the end of his nose" (*IR* **110**), the Governor-General is described in *IR* as the leader of "a country whose people he did not much like, and seldom saw except as shapes with menacing eyes and too many languages, too many gods, [and] too many leaders" (**36**). For him, contemplating Africa amounts to ruminating aloud to his languid, tropics-detesting wife on Africa's otherness (blackness of skin, inferiority, unreason, and so forth). In one scene, he weighs two options. Is Africa a pathological aberration, an accidental effect of higher creation, as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggests? In Ovid's account, Phaeton, the wilful son of Helius, the Greek sun-god, brought the sun-chariot so close to Africa that the skin of its inhabitants

was permanently scorched. Or is Africa the abjured *cause* of Western civilization, as Herodotus intimates? According to an afrocentrist reading of Herodotus' *History* and other evidence, ancient Egypt was not only a colony of Ethiopia (which itself evolved from the interior of Africa), it also exerted an enormous but today-forgotten cultural influence on ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilization. After a moment's reflection, the Governor-General goes with Ovid's theory, a decision which allows him to continue to misrecognize the way in which the presupposed otherness of Africa is in fact the very support of his racist fantasy of Western superiority, and that the "blood of the continent" is that which "sustain[s] his divine status in the universe of humanity" (*IR* **205**).

That the Governor-General should choose to 'enjoy' Africa, including the three African women who consoled and bore him seven illegitimate children (*IR* **36**), is entirely consistent with his role as representative of the white man who rewrites Africa's history in sloping calligraphic hand:

> He deprived us of history, of civilization, and unintentionally, deprived us of humanity too […] And as the Governor-General rewrote time (made his longer, made ours shorter), as he rendered invisible our accomplishments, wiped out traces of our ancient civilizations, rewrote the meaning and beauty of our customs, as he abolished the world of spirits, diminished our feats of memory, turned our philosophies into crude superstitions, our rituals into childish dances, our religions into animal worship and animistic trances, our art into crude relics and primitive forms […] as he rewrote our past, he altered our present. And the alteration created new spirits which fed the bottomless appetite of the great god of chaos. (*IR* **111–12**)

Interestingly, not only is the Governor-General set up as a thoroughgoing racist, he is also subsequently made to renounce the enjoyment he derives from being racist. By means of Okri's authorial intervention, an angel flies over the city and touches "the Governor-General with a sudden perception of the beauties of the continent" (*IR* **157**). So "touched" does he become as a result that he starts to write about a different Africa, one that Senghor would have approved of:

> He rhapsodized about their love for music, their unscientific thinking, their explosive laughter, their preference for myth over reality, for story over fact, for mystification over clarification, for dance over stillness, for ecstasy over contemplation, for metaphysics over logic, for the many over the one. (*IR* **159**)

Okri's Governor-General is clearly not a full-bodied character but a caricature and whipping-boy whose primary function is to enact white racism. Even so, he is not without historical precedents. Reading *IR* against Nigeria, and without reducing Okri's handling of history and politics to a simple matter of objectively ascertainable and verifiable facts, it is possible to show that Okri's depiction of the Governor-General may well have been inspired by, or may allude to, at least two prominent British colonial administrators who served in Nigeria: Sir Frederick Lugard (later Lord), Governor-General of Nigeria (1914–19); and Sir James Robertson, the last Governor-General of pre-independent Nigeria (1955–60).

One of the things for which Lugard is known today is the racism that coloured his empire-building in Africa, something the likes of Margery Perham saw not as racism proper but as imperial benevolence:

> To Lugard and the other makers of new empire Africa was a place of poverty, ignorance, and of remediable cruelties. Above all, they had seen the helplessness of Africa in the grip of the slave-trade. They had no doubt that the greatest conceivable good for this unhappy continent was for it to come under the rule of civilized powers.[1]

In Lugard's eyes, the black African, belonging to one of the child races of the world, was superstitious, excitable, lacking in self-control and discipline, deficient in the ability to manage and control men and business, and lacking apprehension and the ability to visualize the future.[2] With regard to Nigeria specifically, Lugard's writings reveal an unequivocal contempt for the "pagan" and Christian "trousered negros" of the South, and a clear leaning towards the pale-skinned feudal Muslim North, a people he described as belonging to "a superior race-type"[3] and "more capable of rule than the indigenous races."[4] Lugard's preference for the North was not motivated simply by political expediency. According to Isichei, there was "some more deep-seated neurosis at work."[5] This perhaps accounts for his belief that the adoption of European dress was partly responsible for making the european-

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[1] Margery Perham, *Lugard: The Years of Adventure, 1858–1896* (London: Collins, 1956): 712.

[2] Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, intro. Margery Perham (1922; London: Frank Cass, 5th ed. 1965): 69–70.

[3] Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, 76.

[4] *The Dual Mandate*, 198.

[5] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Nigeria* (London, Lagos & New York: Longman, 1983): 391.

ized African "less fertile, more susceptible to lung-trouble and other diseases, and to defective dentition."[6] It also probably explains why he kept Christianity and Western education out of the Muslim North and "reserved his most venomous ridicule and hostility for [those] who resembled him most closely, and had taken his culture as a model":[7] namely, westernized, christianized and educated Southerners. Lugard had good reasons to despise Nigerians in the South; they were vocal, assertive and nationalistic compared with their Northern counterparts. Not only that, they had the temerity to reject colonialism and demand independence even though they had not, in Lugard's view, "shown [themselves] to be possessed of ability to rule either [their] own community or backward peoples of [their] own race, even under favourable conditions."[8]

In comparison with Lugard, whose real-life racism is as virulent as the racism of Okri's Governor-General, Sir James Robertson has been treated much more kindly in mainstream historiography. Michael Crowder, a well-known historian of Nigeria, describes Robertson as "the ideal man to represent Britain during the final phase of [Nigeria's] self-government."[9] Sir Gawain Bell, too, a former colleague of Robertson's in the Sudan and Governor of Northern Nigeria between 1957 and 1962, is full of praise: "He worked untiringly to preserve the unity of the Federation and to forestall or prevent anything that might damage it [...] To him too, Nigeria owes a substantial and lasting debt."[10] And Margery Perham, who penned the foreword to Robertson's memoir *Transition in Africa*, writes that Robertson displayed "dignity and imperturbability" as the Governor-General of Nigeria.[11] He was an honourable, impartial leader, "a charioteer whose task was not to choose the course or the winning post but to keep his three highly spirited horses running in unison."[12]

The "three highly spirited horses" refer to the leaders of the three rival political parties in Nigeria who contested in the 1959 elections under Robertson's auspices: Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (NPC/North), Nnamdi Azikiwe (NCNC/East), and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (AG/West). The 1959 elections

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[6] Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, 79–80.

[7] Isichei, *A History of Nigeria*, 391.

[8] Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, 84.

[9] Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber & Faber, 3rd ed. 1973): 290.

[10] Sir Gawain Bell, *An Imperial Twilight* (London: Lester Crook, 1989): 107.

[11] Margery Perham, "Foreword" to Sir James Robertson, *Transition in Africa: From Direct Rule to Independence, A Memoir* (London: C. Hurst, 1974): xiii.

[12] Perham, "Foreword," xiii.

were critical in the history of Nigeria, as they were to determine who would have governing control of the country upon independence, and whether the would-be nation would begin life with its integrity intact or fatally compromised. They were also possibly the elections Okri had in mind when he closed *IR* with the ominous line "The elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation" (*IR* 337), setting in motion a chain of catastrophic events that is the history of Nigeria's bad infinity: "coups, executions, scandals, […] uprisings […] and the four-year war" (188).[13]

If the 1959 Nigerian elections are the same elections referred to in *IR*, does history in turn bear witness to Okri's contention in *IR* that the election "results had already been decided in advance" (176) – rigged, in a word? Does it show that Robertson was an impartial "charioteer" who did not "choose the course or the winning post" but kept "his three highly spirited horses running in unison"? Comprehensive third-party accounts of Robertson's role in Nigerian history are conspicuously hard to come by, and whatever is available is sketchy at best. In Michael Crowder's *The Story of Nigeria*, Robertson is mentioned but once and only in passing. James Coleman, in his seminal book *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, sums up the Governor-General's role in one short paragraph. Elizabeth Isichei's *A History of Nigeria* does not even list him in the index. That Robertson should receive so little attention from historians is curious, especially when we take into account Perham's contention that he did not merely preside over the formal stages, but was an active mediator whose influence greatly shaped political events leading up to Nigeria's independence.[14] Despite the paucity of sources, it is evident that Robertson was, like Lugard, more of a friend to the North than he was to the South. He wrote that Southern leaders were argumentative, uninhibited troublemakers "who noisily showed [their] disagreement in Council or Parliament without good manners or restraint."[15] Northern leaders were, by contrast, more "dignified."[16] Balewa (the main horse from the North), for instance, was generously described as a religious "man of the highest integrity"[17] and "a good speaker, with a splendid command of English, a resonant voice and a

[13] The "four-year war" appears to be an allusion to Nigeria's first military coup and counter-coup which took place within a year (1966), and the succeeding three-year Biafran war (1967–70).

[14] Perham, "Foreword," xii.

[15] Sir James Robertson, *Transition in Africa: From Direct Rule to Independence, A Memoir*, foreword by Margery Perham (London: C. Hurst, 1974): 223.

[16] Robertson, *Transition in Africa*, 223.

[17] *Transition in Africa*, 214.

fund of common sense."[18] Robertson wrote that he and Balewa became so close in the course of their friendship that there was "little [they] could not discuss."[19] So close, in fact, that he invited Balewa to form a federal government even "*before* the results of the [**1959**] elections were announced (but presumably when they were already known)."[20]

Nnamdi Azikiwe ("Zik"), the leader of the NCNC and the Eastern horse, had criticized Robertson's invitation to Balewa as premature and inept. Robertson in turn remarked that Zik was probably disgruntled because he wanted to be Prime Minister himself.[21] This was not an unfair comment, since Zik had, and had been, expected to lead independent Nigeria for the reason that he was one of the more prominent nationalists who fought for and won Nigeria's independence. Instead, he was offered the position of President of the rubber-stamp Senate. To understand this turn of events, we need to bear in mind that the momentous **1959** elections produced no clear winner. None of the competing parties secured the required majority to independently form government, which meant that a coalition had to be formed. Osaghae argues that had national interest been a priority, the NCNC (East) and the AG (West) together with their alliance parties in the North (representing mostly ethnic minorities in the NPC-dominated North) would have been in the best position to form a coalition.[22] This was because the NCNC and the AG had a much larger national spread in comparison to the NPC, which only managed to secure token votes outside the North. In what is regarded as the triumph of politics over reason, what emerged instead was an NCNC–NPC coalition and the installation of Balewa of the NPC as the country's first Prime Minister, a man considered by some as a puppet to the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, reputed to be the most powerful man in the North, who claimed direct descent from the Prophet Mohamad. This was followed by the political marginalization of hundreds of minority ethnic groups and the thwarting of Nigeria's promise.

Why did an NCNC–AG coalition not eventuate? Robertson reasoned that the NPC would not have countenanced a Southern government, which was what such a coalition would have been. Britain would not have countenanced it either, ostensibly for fear of the North's pulling out of the federation and jeopardizing the entire independence-plan if it did not have (at least some)

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[18] Robertson, *Transition in Africa*, **215**.

[19] *Transition in Africa*, **215**.

[20] Osaghae, *Crippled Giant*, **33**, emphasis added.

[21] Robertson, *Transition in Africa*, **235**.

[22] Osaghae, *Crippled Giant*, **32**.

control of parliament. Osaghae rightly points out that "once the favoured status of the NPC was made clear, the question of coalition was no longer a theoretical one; it was simply a matter of which grouping – the AG or the NCNC – the NPC leaders were willing to work with."[23] What this means, in short, is that an election win was a foregone conclusion for the NPC, in the same way that the elections in Okri's *abiku* trilogy are 'bought' by the unnamed political party that proudly proclaims through a loudspeaker that

> "VICTORY IS OURS ALREADY. WE HAVE WON. WE BRING POWER TO THE PEOPLE. WE BRING WEALTH AND STABILITY. THOSE WHO VOTE FOR US WILL ENJOY, THOSE WHO DON'T WILL EAT DUSTBINS!" (*IR* 228)

The Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?

Coming back to the question we posed earlier: did Robertson have a hand in the North's forewinning of the elections? Was he, like Okri's Governor-General, the type who would, if he were guilty of treason against Nigeria, "burn all the secret documents, all the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation, the redrawn boundaries, memos about meetings with religious leaders and political figures" (*IR* 36)? And was Okri possibly alluding to Robertson and other key players when the murderers of Ade's father confess that

> they had masters above them, a hierarchy of masters, who never committed crimes, whose hands were always clean, and who delegated the thoughts, the acts and the consequences of their crime and wickedness to lesser beings, to their minions, their servants and their disposable friends? (*IR* 57)

In defence of Britain and Robertson, Perham wrote in 1974 that

> It must be accepted that no British administration, handling the tense, final process of colonial emancipation, could have re-made situations which resulted from hasty frontier-making in the malleable Africa of the preceding [i.e. nineteenth] century.[24]

Robertson, too, appears to have had a clear conscience: "I trust that nothing in the policies with which I was associated in my overseas service exacerbated

[23] Osaghae, *Crippled Giant*, 33.
[24] Perham, "Foreword," xiv.

the tensions" which caused Nigeria to stumble from one crisis to another.[25] Like Perham, he attributed Nigeria's problems to circumstances beyond his control. The country failed, he wrote, *despite* the perfectly sound federal constitution – "freely negotiated and accepted by all the political party leaders"[26] – which he had helped to create. The right structures were in place but "the force of tribalism was greater than anyone had estimated" and "many of the politicians were corrupt and aimed at their own enrichment."[27] It is true, as Robertson pointed out, that tribalism and corruption were endemic. What he failed to mention, however, was that tribalism and corruption did not by themselves spontaneously appear, and that they were, according to one school of thought, largely the *effects* of his having created in the first place the political climate which gave the North the political upper hand over its Southern neighbours.

The eurocentric little that has been published on and by Robertson in the traditional paper-and-ink format does not directly attest to this, but there are electronically published essays which allege that Whitehall (British civil service) officials had freely admitted in private that they had rigged Nigeria's **1959** independence elections. The author of these essays,[28] one Harold Smith, claims to have been a former British Government senior civil servant in the Department of Labour in pre-independent Nigeria. Smith writes that he knew Robertson personally and that, for his refusal to remain quiet about Britain's rigging of the **1959** elections, he was threatened by Robertson, bribed by Perham on Robertson's behalf, poisoned, and subsequently 'erased' from the files of the British government. Smith's allegations are scandalous, to say the least, but do they bear up to scrutiny? Smith's serious allegations, which have since been picked up by the *Vanguard* (the Nigerian daily) and several Nigeria-related news portals,[29] have not been corroborated by established historians or any authoritative parties, and it remains unconfirmed whether he is truly who he claims to be. His website furnishes the reference numbers of letters from the British Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence granting him permission to publish his essays on the internet. The latter has not replied to requests for verification, while the Historical and Records Division of the

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[25] Robertson, *Transition in Africa*, **258**.

[26] *Transition in Africa*, **256**.

[27] *Transition in Africa*, **256**.

[28] Smith's essays are hyperlinked from his Libertas website: <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk>

[29] See, for example, <http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles.php?articleId=**160**>; and <http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/farticles/fallacies_of_unity.htm>.

Cabinet Office responded by saying that it "can find no trace of those letters that Mr Smith purports to give him the authority to do so," qualifying that "this does not mean that such letters were not sent."[30] According to the Cabinet Office, it is part of its normal records procedures that "material that will not be needed for business purposes is destroyed once it becomes five years old." In its second reply, the Cabinet Office states that it can "neither confirm nor deny" that it had issued the said letters to Smith, and would respond accordingly if the issue of verification were raised in a court of law.[31]

As they stand, the facts neither prove nor disprove Smith's allegations. Notwithstanding, it is worth bearing in mind, first, that the internet has in the last decade become a crucial and credible new medium through which repressed truths are brought to light. Local-grown sites such as malaysiakini.com and jeffooi.com, for example, have become indispensable alternative Malaysian news sources. Without them, English-reading Malaysians would be deprived of access to dedicated sources of news and views that offer alternative perspectives on socio-political issues to those disseminated by government-controlled media. It would also serve us well to remember that Britain had committed the same act of treason in Malaya/Malaysia as it is accused of in Nigeria. As Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, writes in his memoirs, "the British plan was to have an independent Malaya with Malays in charge – Malays who would nevertheless need them for some time to help govern the country and fight the communists."[32] Of course, these factors do not by themselves confirm the veracity of Smith's stories, just as historical narratives are not a heaven of truths simply because they are available in print. Thus, for the purposes of our discussion, Smith's account should at best be seen as a marginal counter-discourse that may well become hegemonic in the future. At the very least, it is a compelling narrative which helps the reader to better appreciate *IR*'s anger at the wounding of the nation's destiny.

If official historical accounts only go so far as to suggest that Robertson may have inadvertently created a pre-independence political climate that favoured the NPC, Smith's essays come right out to say that there was nothing inadvertent about it. It was not that "Sir James [Robertson] would do anything dishonourable on his own initiative to diminish or discredit Nigeria,"

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[30] Official email from Brian Hogan, Historical & Records Division, Openness Unit, Cabinet Office, 29 October 2003.

[31] Official email from Brian Hogan, Historical & Records Division, Openness Unit, Cabinet Office, 31 October 2003.

[32] Lee, *The Singapore Story*, 225.

Smith is careful to qualify.[33] Rather, as part of his code of duty and honour as an officer, he was compelled to carry out Whitehall's and Westminster's orders without question. Smith claims that

> the name of the game in handing over Nigeria to the pro-British North was to make safe a vulnerable target for Soviet penetration. An oppressed colony was assumed to be an obvious target for Soviet imperialism. A newly 'independent' nation safely inside the Commonwealth with moderate and responsible, i.e. pro-British leaders, would expand the free world.[34]

Smith contends that although Britain's attitude towards Nigeria was coloured by Lugard's and Robertson's pro-North racism, Britain still had good reasons to believe that an NPC-led government would give the newborn country the stability it needed. Furthermore, as was well-known at that time, there were fears that an NCNC–AG alliance would tempt Southern leaders to settle old scores with the NPC. That by itself was likely to have plunged the country into chaos and paved the way for its infiltration by communists. But as Smith writes, "we will never know"[35] if the worst-case scenario might have eventuated, since Britain had "flagrantly destroy[ed] Nigeria's first experiment in democracy" when it decided the winner well in advance of the independence elections.[36] Omo Omoruyi, a Nigeria scholar, has also indirectly made the same point, stressing that Britain's fear that the Sardauna of Sokoto would "take his 'North' away" was illogical.[37] Although the NCNC and the AG were Southern parties, they had "representatives throughout the country including the North [...] So which 'North' would the Sardauna have taken away?" Besides, Omoruyi writes, "Who told Sir James that the three political parties (NPC, NCNC and AG) could not work together as a transitional measure within the first four years after independence?"

The extent to which Britain went to secure victory for the NPC as revealed in Smith's essays is astonishing, to say the least. It did not merely involve a simple tinkering of the elections results but a systematic effort to cripple the leadership of the NCNC and the AG years in advance of the 1959 elections.

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33 Personal email from Harold Smith, 9 August 2000.

34 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/badguys.htm>

35 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/players.htm>

36 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/badguys.htm>

37 Omo Omoruyi, "Opportunity for Reflection, Not Merriment, Part 1," <http://www.ngex.com/personalities/voices/oomoruyi102101.htm>, accessed 28 December 2001.

Zik (leader of the NCNC in the East), whose activities had been monitored by British intelligence for some time, was charged and found guilty in 1957 of mishandling public funds. All this is well known; but what remains untold, according to Smith, is that Britain had deliberately built in the legal loophole which enabled Zik to use the funds to finance his political activities. Having thus set the trap, they allowed him to commit a minor breach which, over time, developed into a major misdemeanour. When the 'crime' became sufficiently serious, a tribunal was set up to find him guilty. Zik did not lose his Eastern support-base as a result of the scandal. But he had been politically neutered, for not only was he personally bankrupted, his "great NCNC, the vessel which would guarantee him power, [was left] drifting on to the rocks. The British had struck at his weak point, the money needed for political action."[38] The same trap is believed to have been laid for Obafemi Awolowo (Awo), leader of the AG in Western Nigeria. In 1962, he was charged, found guilty and jailed for diverting money from a government corporation to fund the AG's political activities. According to the historian John Hatch, Awo's sentence was generally regarded as a political trial set up by his opponents, "particularly those in the federal government" (controlled by the NPC), to ruin and remove him from public life.[39]

Smith's essays detail many more examples of British chicanery. For our present purposes, let us select only a handful which directly attest to the Governor-General's complicity. According to Smith, Robertson was not the "blimp" that journalists who wrote about Nigeria's independence might have imagined, but "an Oxford-educated street fighter, experienced in covert intelligence, anti-Communist operations, terrorism and pulling the wool over inquisitive journalists' eyes."[40] One might say that he was, to borrow the words Okri uses to describe his Governor-General, "a manufacturer, a retailer of phenomena" (*IR* 232). Many journalists had been lied to, while scholars like Michael Crowder who, according to Smith, knew about the rigging of the 1959 elections was blackmailed into writing a clean version of Nigerian history. Smith says that Crowder was a close friend and "a very promiscuous homosexual" whose dangerous life-style in Lagos was known to Robertson.[41] Robertson had allegedly used that knowledge against Crowder and asked him to persuade Smith to "stop dabbling in politics": that is, to keep quiet about the election-rigging. Otherwise, Crowder might suddenly find himself em-

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38 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/players.htm>

39 John Hatch, *Nigeria: A History* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971): 227.

40 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/badguys.htm>

41 <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk/players.htm>

broiled in some sex scandal that would ruin his career. The end result was that Crowder was forced to make his peace with Government House and thereafter omit vital facts from his book.

How should all this inflect our reading of the *abiku* trilogy? What are the implications if we take the fictional Governor-General in *IR* as Okri's allusion to Sir James Robertson, the last white Governor-General of Nigeria? And what is it that *IR* reveals but *TFR* and *SOE* do not? First, it is important to note that *IR* does not merely afford the reader the strongest hints yet as to the identity of the unnamed and betrayed nation in which the trilogy is set. (From *TFR* and *SOE*, we already know that the said nation is, on one level of interpretation, a version of Nigeria, Okri's home country.) More importantly, *IR* puts in historical context the possible reason why the unborn nation (Nigeria) is repeatedly described in *TFR* and *SOE* as destined for still-birth. (Recall that the first two books lament the would-be nation's betrayal without spelling out the historical correlates). By repudiating the whitewashed dominant history of Nigeria (as recorded by the likes of Crowder, Perham and Robertson) and retracing what it posits as the repressed history of Nigeria's betrayal, *IR* retroactively recasts *TFR* and *SOE*, thus making it clear to the reader that while the *abiku* trilogy may be a work of fiction, it is neither detached from history and reality nor lacking in political commitment, as certain critics have claimed. That it is *this* particular version of history that emerges from the trilogy (and not any other version which downplays British treason) also indicates Okri's political positionality vis-à-vis Nigeria's North–South debate. Like many southern nationalists, he appears to reject the North's nationhood ideal – an ideal which, as we discussed in Chapter 2, envisions Nigeria becoming a great nation if each tribe were to adhere to its god-given purpose and place, and allow the leadership-endowed Northerners to rule the country.

A Deeper Realism

As Okri's handling of *IR* demonstrates, fiction is not necessarily fictive or imaginary, or always distinguishable from the 'really existing' reality. Fiction can give expression to a coded, 'unthought' reality that may yet prove to be more real than the hegemonic social reality it seeks to subvert. In more precise terms, it may well prove that Nigeria's textbook history was the reality Nigerians never lived. We find something similar operating in Okri's use of what critics generally call 'magical realism', in the countless number of unearthly phenomena in the trilogy, such as the cast of spirit-children (Azaro and Ade), the "invisible black insects" clinging to the Governor-General's body during the highly-anticipated political rally (*IR* 232), the spirits that borrow other people's bodies to attend the "fabulous masked ball in honour of

Mr Harold Macmillan, prime minister of England" (**145**), and the angel that magically africanized the Governor-General. Certainly, we know on one level that these in-between beings are not real and exist only as a literary device that enables Okri to tell a story. We might say that they are discursive constructions whose function is to parenthesize absolutes (reality, norms, facts), dissolve borders and resist closure. Approaching Okri holistically, however, we will find that the aim of Okri's literary inscription of the magical in the trilogy is not simply to highlight academically the discursivity of 'hard reality' and deconstruct it. Rather, as will be made clear, the aim is to heal/reconcile the nation(-peoples) at the level of the signifier. To elucidate Okri's political use of the magical, let us first analyse 'magical realism' as it is popularly understood and consider whether *TFR*, *SOE* and *IR* fit the description.

That magical-realist texts are potentially subversive is something most scholars would not dispute. To quote Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, their "in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures."[42] Since Okri's magical works exhibit these characteristics, critics tend to align him with an international range of magical-realist writers, including Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Robert Kroetsch, Wilson Harris and Günter Grass. There is logic in putting Okri in the same box as these writers; at the minimum, they all construct fictional worlds that defy reality as we know it. The underside of this lumping-together of writers from diverse cultures, however, is that it turns them into consumers of "an international commodity"[43] and practitioners of a "flourishing trend"[44] and a "contemporary international mode"[45] of representing/subverting local realities. This top-down approach is problematic because it creates the misleading impression that the magical in magical-realist texts is external to the local resource-base. In addition, it implies that the function of the magical is purely instrumental, that its primary role is to amplify the respective writers' non-magical local concerns. In short, the approach runs the risk of turning magical-realist writings into a product of glocalization: that is, a global commodity (magical realism) with a local face (local cultural and political content).

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[42] Lois Parkinson Zamora & Wendy B. Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Zamora & Faris (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, **1995**): **6**.

[43] Zamora & Faris, "Introduction," **2**.

[44] Zamora & Faris, "Introduction," **5**.

[45] Zamora & Faris, "Introduction," **4**.

'Glocalized magical realism' is arguably an apt description for magical-realist texts by writers from cultural milieux where the magical is external rather than integral to their constitution. Take the case of *What the Crow Said* by the English-Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch. To the extent that there is little if any magical element which is integral to English-Canadian culture and its belief-system, we may argue that the magical in Kroetsch's novel functions purely as a top-down decentering discursive strategy. By contrast, Okri's trilogy may be described as a bottom-up literary textualization of the magical. That is to say, the magical it represents is derived not from external sources but from indigenous beliefs (the Nigerian *abiku* phenomenon, the Yoruba concept of predestination and belief in living ancestral spirits, and so on) that are central to the community upon which the trilogy is based. It is for this reason that Okri says the magical in his work is "not magic" at all but "a deeper kind of realism"[46] and "a dimension of the spiritual."[47] As he explains in an interview,

> I'm looking at the world in *The Famished Road* from the inside of the African world view, but without it being codified as such. This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It's quite simple and straightforward. I'm treating it naturally. It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions.[48]

Okri's claim apropos of *TFR* that he has rendered reality "naturally" makes sense if we accept that it is only natural for a spirit-child like Azaro to see spirits, and for Dad, who practises ancestor-worship, to call upon his ancestors for assistance in times of trouble. Besides, the spirit-world in the trilogy is not dreamt up willy-nilly but corresponds to the three-tiered Yoruba/ Igbo spiritual cosmology comprising the ancestral plane, the sphere of higher spirits, and the interspatial no-man's-land where spirit-eaters reside.[49] Okri's claim to naturalness only becomes problematic when it comes to *SOE* and *IR*. Quayson has noted that, unlike *TFR*, "the real world and the esoteric" in *SOE* (and *IR*, as shall see) are so deeply interpenetrative that not only Azaro but "all characters have equal access to the world of spirits."[50] Of course, it

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[46] Blishen, *Ben Okri with Edward Blishen.*
[47] Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," **46**.
[48] Ross, "Ben Okri," **337–38**.
[49] See Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanje*, **11**.
[50] Quayson, "Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System," **154**.

should be qualified that not all characters always really "see dead people," to borrow the famous phrase from M. Night Shyamalan's film *The Sixth Sense*. An attentive reading will reveal that purported magical sightings are often merely hearsay or unverifiable allegations: "*People* saw antelopes with aquamarine eyes running through them, as if they were ghosts;" "A woman *claimed* that while walking she had slipped into another world" (*SOE* **151**, **166**; my emphases). There are, nonetheless, magical events which cannot be put down as mere allegation, since they literally occur before an entire group of people, albeit through the eyes of the narrator. Take the butterfly-burning episode in *SOE*. Following the terror and devastation unleashed by the political forces, the compound people are amazed to find a mysterious avalanche of dead butterflies falling on every visible surface. Some are almost certain the world is ending soon; others hallucinate in fear, "a new colossal helplessness" awakened in them (*SOE* **155**). They all become ill for lack of dreaming until Dad hustles the inhabitants of the compound with great vigour and "the voice of a soldier who had received his mandate from the crisis of the moment" (**163**), commanding them to collect the dead butterflies and dump them in a pile, after which he drenches the heap with kerosene and sets fire to it. "As the flames lit up the darkness, flaring erratically, *we* [the compound people including Azaro and his family] gasped in terror and amazement at seeing spirits rising into the air on golden plumes of smoke" (**164**; my emphasis).

Is the above a case of collective hallucination? If so, can we say the same about the scene in *IR* where Dad, languishing in a boiling cell after being arrested by the police, suddenly finds himself "in the very presence of an unbearable fire which was roasting his being and brain, turning all that he was into living ashes" (*IR* **54**)? And what about the "gold dust" the jailers find matted in Dad's hair and the "diamond powder" clinging to his face (**55**)? It would not be difficult to come up with symbolic interpretations of the above events. For instance, it may be argued that the butterfly-burning scene signifies the compound people's spiritual awakening and the renewal of their capacity to perceive the world around them in more than three dimensions. Dad's consumption by fire, on the other hand, may be read as a fiery manifestation of his inner spirit and symbolic of the extreme purification required by the nation to "burn away [its] corruptions" (**53**). It is also equally possible to read the scene as inaugurating yet another of Dad's symbolic rebirths, a re-origination of self through baptism by fire. Many more similar interpretations may be drawn from these two episodes alone if we stick to the same literary approach. What the approach is unable to produce, though, is the illumination required to tackle the naive but crucial question we posed earlier: how real are these magical phenomena? Should we approach them on the primary level as coded inscriptions or as literal representations to be taken at face-value, as events

actually occurring before one's very eyes? To what extent are they reflective of the African world-view conceived of by Okri? Are they a faithful representation of reality from the traditional African standpoint, or have they been stylized, as Quayson suggests? The evidence before us suggests that Okri does not always faithfully replicate traditional beliefs. Here we need only recall his rewriting of the traditional conception of destiny which we discussed in Chapter **3**. Rather than placing destiny in the hands of the Big Other, he invests it in the human agent. The rewriting is relatively minor, since only one detail is improved upon, but the result is far-reaching – destiny becomes the most crucial element, holding together the entire spiritual universe. By investing destiny in the agent, Okri has quite terroristically inverted the traditional universe.

Words Are Things

The impossibility of formulating a 'one size fits all' interpretative solution to the magical can only be a positive good, since it allows the critic to "multiply the possibilities of interpretation of a work [e.g., the *abiku* trilogy]; to open up a work, to illuminate the world of a work; not to reduce it and to diminish it."[51] However, with regard to the magical, it is important to note that the openness of Okri's fictional writings is not simply there to facilitate an infinite dialogue between reader and text, but to put it to the reader that, within and beyond the universe of fiction, "what is perceived and said are real things too."[52] On the relation between the magical in his writings and the Nigerianness of his personal reactions, Okri says:

> I still believe that words are things [...] If you were to say that tonight's poetry reading would be a failure, I would ask you to withdraw it for fear that saying it would make it happen. Words resonate. They are parallel to events. It is magical thinking. Not what many critics have called magical reality. That is an exaggeration of reality, a transformation of reality. Magical realism is (the belief) that what is perceived and said are real things too.[53]

Okri's proposition that words can somehow magically shape or jinx events in real life, or that a "single thought of ours can change the universe" (Dad, in *TFR* **497**), is likely to cause the cynic to roll his eyes and mutter "silly super-

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[51] Okri, in Falconer, "Whispering of the Gods," **50**.
[52] Okri, in Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," **6**.
[53] Hattersley, "Ben Okri: A Man in Two Minds," **6**.

stition." (The same cynic would also likely put the proposition in the same category as the well-known Chinese superstitious belief that the number eight is more auspicious than four.[54]) However, if we reformulate the proposition as "Can discourse construct the reality or meaning of an event?" we will see that what is at issue here is not magic (superstition, the supernatural, mind over matter, etc.) but the primacy of the signifier: that is, the way signifiers form signifying chains which in turn constitute discourse, and how discourse structures our thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, fantasies and ultimately reality itself.

From as early as *Stars of the New Curfew* (*SONC*) (**1989**), Okri has paid special attention to the (political) function of the signifier, particularly the way an 'event' (as a floating signifier which bears neither absolute non-fixity nor absolute fixity of meaning) can be sutured to any number of signifieds to produce an infinite series of meanings and 'facts'. As we discussed in Chapter **1**, in this language game the meaning most likely to become hegemonic is the one that privileges those in power. This much is cynically acknowledged by the nameless protagonist of Okri's short story "Stars of the New Curfew": "Those who get on in society, those who rise high and affect events, do so by manipulating, by manufacturing reality" (*SONC* **117**). In *IR*, one of the more palpable illustrations of the discursivity of reality is found in the Governor-General's writing of his memoir. The writing is not merely an inscription of personal observations on Africa and Africans from the perspective of a powerful colonial civil servant. Rather, as we saw, it represents the overwriting of the continent's past and the alteration of its present reality by racist colonial discourse.

Local elites across all tribal groups, too, are capable of employing words to manufacture reality. Take the episode in *IR* where Mum rises and then falls out of prominence by the stroke of a pen. It all begins with her having staged a successful protest which leads to Dad's release from prison. The newspapers applaud her courage and she soon becomes a national figure. Mum's sudden and unexpected rise is accompanied by positive changes. For the first time, we see her taking a keen, open interest in politics, speaking of "all the things she had always been silent about" (*IR* **34**). On a platform hastily built on top of battered cars, she speaks in six languages on freedom and justice, independence and the end of tribalism, the unity and liberty of all women, and the special ways of African women. Rather amusingly, the deeper she immerses herself in politics, the more she becomes like Dad. Overtaken by fame and turning loud-voiced, she speaks of becoming a wrestler *and* a politician (**76**).

[54] In Chinese/Cantonese belief, eight symbolizes prosperity while four symbolizes death.

Her "new life," "greater opportunity" and "new freedom" are, however, unexpectedly snatched from her when the newspapers, in an about-face manoeuvre, report that Dad was actually freed by a group of elite women (**67**). Infuriated by the news when she gets wind of it, Mum quickly sets out to scotch the lie, but to no avail. She subsequently learns that the leader of the vampiric elite women has become a politician and an official candidate of a political party.

On a larger scale, a similar re-invention of reality is found in the newspaper reporting of the much-anticipated political rally. Although the rally was an utter failure and literally a bloody riot, it is reported by the new powers of the era as "an unqualified success" (**296**), while the people's protest is described as "overwhelming support for the Party of the Rich" (**297**). To add to the air of authenticity, the report even carries accompanying photographs of the crowd at the rally – their faces beaming, their expressions intent and hopeful. The entire process of fabrication is so well coordinated that "we [the compound people] began to think of ourselves as hypocrites. We began to imagine that we had indeed been peaceful at the rally, that we had colluded in our cowardice by inventing the alternative ending, the disruptions, the burnings, the rage, the ten people dead" (**297**). As final illustration of the power of words, we might recall the episode in *TFR* following the milk-poisoning incident. The Party of the Rich unleashes terrible violence upon the compound but nothing about it is reported in the newspapers the next day. According to Azaro, it was "as if the events were never real" (*TFR* **183**). In the absence of words to concretize reality, real events take on "the status of rumours," causing the compound people to wonder if they have not collectively dreamt up the fevers of the night. From these examples, it should be clear why Okri maintains that "what is perceived and said are real things too." Although words (signifying chains, thought-perceptions) are abstractions devoid of positive existence, they are real insofar as they are capable of bringing about concrete changes that can profoundly affect lives.

In Okri, the subject lives and dies by the signifier. Without logos, there is no subjectivity, no *homo fabula* or "story-telling beings" and no "meaning – apprehension – comprehension"; indeed, "Without stories we would go mad. Life would lose its moorings and lose its orientation."[55] Okri elaborates:

> It is through the fictions and stories we tell ourselves and others that we live the life, hide from it, harmonise it, canalise it, have a relation-

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[55] Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, **23–25**.

> ship with it, shape it, accept it, are broken by it, redeem it, or flow with the life.[56]
>
> It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world.[57]

As the subject lives and dies by the signifier, so too the nation. This is conveyed by Okri when he writes that "Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies."[58] By "fictions and stories," Okri means discourse in all its varied forms: parables, fables, songs, religious messages, history, myths. Constituted by language, they belong to the same category as Kant's transcendental Idea and Lacan's notion of fantasy – fictions that regulate the universe of our self-experience and literally sustain our being-in-the-world. Without them, reality itself would lose its discursive-logical consistency. In Lacan, as in Okri, there is no subject without language. The subject, by definition, exists in a state of discord between knowledge and being. He exists only if he overlooks his non-existence, "like the proverbial cat from the cartoons which, although it has no ground under its feet, is unaware of it and so calmly continues to walk in the air."[59] Applying this logic to the divided, tribalized nation-peoples in Okri's trilogy, we might say that the tribalized members of the unborn nation do not exist, and that their misrecognition of their nonexistence is one of the major causes of the antagonisms that have held the nation back from flowering. Because they misrecognize their nonexistence, they continue to cling to their myths of supremacy, "no matter how monstrous or useless" (*IR* 32). They think they exist because they have yet to recognize that the Other to be antagonized/negated is but a fascinating, repulsive *semblant* which distracts them from the reality of their nonexistence. So long as this misrecognition persists, the nation will continue to suffer as an eternal undead.

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[56] Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, 24–25.

[57] *Birds of Heaven*, 34.

[58] *Birds of Heaven*, 21.

[59] Slavoj Žižek, "Lacan with Quantum Physics," in *FutureNatural: Nature, Science, Culture*, ed. George Robertson et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 280.

PART III
K.S. MANIAM: TWO NOVELS

Karma is no more rebirth after death,
controlled by metaphysical forces,
but the transformation of personality
undertaken by conscious choice.[1]

[1] K.S. Maniam, "Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction: A Personal Reflection," in *The Writer's Sense of the Past: Essays on Southeast Asian and Australasian Literature*, ed. Kirpal Singh (Singapore: Singapore UP, **1987**): **220**.

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6 *The Return*

Trilogy of the Eternal Return

FOR ALL THEIR ACKNOWLEDGED SIMILARITIES, K.S. Maniam's *The Return* (*TR*) and *In A Far Country* (*IFC*) – the two novels we will be examining in Part III – are almost always read separately. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with that; after all, they are, strictly speaking, self-contained works. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that, by taking *TR* and *IFC* as independent works, it has from the outset foreclosed the possibility that the writings may be more intimately related than a casual intertextual reading would suggest, and that there is, as it turns out, an authorially intended and textually supported unifying logic that binds *TR* and *IFC* together as two-thirds of a trilogy which concludes with the unpublished *Delayed Passage* (*DP*).[1]

By "trilogy," I have in mind something other than the standard conception of the term. In contrast to Okri's *abiku* trilogy, Maniam's is held together neither by the same characters nor by a contiguous plot but by the preoccupation of each text with the protagonist's (political) struggle to eject into the past the curse of the 'eternal return', a notion usually associated with Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, the eternal return (or the "eternal recurrence of the same") is described as a life which has been lived before and is to be lived innumerable times over. In each repetition, "there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great [will return] all in the same succession and sequence."[2] To many of us this would seem like a curse, but to Nietzsche

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[1] Maniam has put the publication of the completed *DP* on indefinite hold. He has since completed another novel, *Between Lives* (*BL*), first published in May 2003. See Appendix 1 for a synopsis of *DP*.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, tr. Josefine Nauckhoff (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001): 194.

it is an affirmation of life, an affirmation which advocates that life be lived in every moment in such a way that we would will that moment back again over and over. In Maniam, by contrast, the eternal return, or what is referred to in *IFC* as an "eternity of repetition" (*IFC* 43), is neither life-affirming nor the affliction of just one individual. Instead, it manifests itself first and foremost as a family curse that besmirches each and every generation of the bloodline. To inherit it – as each of the central Indian-Malaysian protagonists in the trilogy suspects they have – is to be condemned to repeat their immigrant forebear's failure to find "some elusive rootedness" (*IFC* 40) in Malaya/Malaysia and in "that vast country commonly called life" (144). Despite having escaped the abject poverty of plantation life, and despite having made it further than their immigrant forebear could have dreamt of (by attaining white-collar dignity, career, material success, ownership of a home), they continue to suffer from a crippling incapacity for happiness. Always and somehow, any enjoyment that comes their way is ruined by simultaneous feelings of dissatisfaction or displeasure. Like the haunted male figures in Edvard Munch's iconic works, all of which are rooted in a single inquiry, "Why was there a curse on my cradle?,"[3] Maniam's anti-heroes are depressed and prone to brood on the past and such brow-knitting subjects as loss and estrangement. Added to this is an unbearable anxiety that haunts them, a disquieting sense that life has somehow been compromised and that the price they have to pay for this is the thwarting of their "deep seated desire for a home" (*IFC* 28).

This pattern of the blind and endless repetition of the past is also reflected in the trilogy's overall temporal plotting. In *TR*, Ravi in his young adulthood takes stock of all that he has gained and lost in his lifelong pursuit of the "dignity of the individual" (*TR* 141), of his narrow escape from the 'bad luck' which plagued his grandmother and father, made them inconsolable for failing to find a home in the land, and drove them to an early grave. Ravi does all this from a point in time in the 1960s, looking back as far as the two decades preceding Malaysia's independence in 1957. *IFC*, the second novel, is similarly premissed. Rajan, a successful middle-aged businessman, traverses the same temporal distance as Ravi, but from somewhere between the 1970s and the 1980s, in his quest to come to terms with the forces that (mis)shaped his life and "trapped and killed [his] father" (*IFC* 66). And in the mid-1990s in *DP*, Kumar, an academic of retiring age who was "forced to retire ignobly from the university," confronts "the past he has avoided" in order to retrace "his straying [from] the true path of self-fulfilment" (*DP*). This process takes

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[3] Edvard Munch, in *Edvard Munch: The Frieze of Life*, by Mara–Helen Wood (London: National Gallery Publications, 1992): 157.

him back to the **1940**s, a time when Malaysia was Malaya, and the people were subjugated to British and Japanese imperial forces.

From this brief mapping of the trilogy, two distinct patterns may be discerned. The first and more immediately apparent is the way in which the trilogy is structured to convey a calendrical sense of time's passing. From *TR* to *IFC* and finally to *DP*, the narrative present (the temporal point from which the respective protagonists/narrators speak) draws closer to our own present. And as it does, the protagonist of each subsequent novel matures in age, paralleling Malaysia's coming of age as a postcolonial nation. Indeed, it is the nation's independence and modernization, its opening-up of a whole new world of opportunities, that has made it possible for the protagonists to escape the oppressive backwaters whence they came to become professionals in their own right. The second discernible pattern is the circular time of the eternal return. Notice how the *same* attempt at reconciliation with the past recurs in nearly *every* successive decade following Malaysia's independence. Rationally, we know, of course, that the protagonists are three. Yet it would be difficult not to think of them at some level as one and the same, caught in circular time, compelled to encircle the past forlornly until some form of redemption is found.

Why, despite the protagonists' best efforts to cancel out the eternal return, do they continue to suffer from the same curse of alienation that plagued their immigrant forebear *when they themselves are not immigrants*? Why, like their forefathers, do they keep longing for the inaccessible elsewhere, that country that does not exist but which they nevertheless bear in their dreams? What does it take to break this cycle of despair? Drink weed-killer like the rubber-estate women in *IFC* who could find no other way out? Our exploration of these questions, it should be signalled from the outset, will depart from the standard approach, which insists on the necessity of interpreting Maniam's works through Hindu symbology. As will become clear, this is a necessary step, since one of the objects of our interrogation is Hinduism itself – rather, the Hindu-Indian Thing with which Maniam's characters maintain an 'extimate' relationship.

Entangled Desires: Critic, Author, Narrator

By way of answering the questions raised above, let us begin with Tang Soo Ping's paradigmatic reading of *TR*, in which she argues that the problem with Ravi, the protagonist, is that he "cannot perceive a more hopeful solution to

his problem."[4] He "stands aloof from all symbols of proprietorship, from all dreams of building houses and acquiring property"[5] cherished by Naina and Periathai, his father and grandmother respectively. He ignores "the hearty passion and robust expressiveness of his Indian culture."[6] Most damning of all, he allows himself to be shackled mentally through the colonial education system by the "rapacious," "degenerate" and "impoverished" English culture.[7] All this, according to Tang, makes Ravi "more of a failure than Naina or Periathai."[8] Whereas Naina and Periathai have at least the Indian sensibility to nurture an intense response to the new land, a passionate desire to belong, Ravi only approaches life with half a commitment, hence his ending-up with a "tightly insulated, sterile" life in which "the means to freedom – the English language – is little more than a sanitizing and dulling agent."[9] According to Tang, Ravi's failure in life is ultimately Maniam's failure as a writer:

> Like most Malaysian works, it [*TR*] is as yet unable to encompass that wider perspective that may be achieved with age and experience. For the marginal life can open the door to new vistas of meaning and understanding. One only has to look at Ellison's *Invisible Man* to realize the exciting possibilities of a freer and more searching outlook.[10]

In her revisiting of the subject in a later essay, Tang alters her position slightly. She concedes that Ravi sees the light after all, as reflected in his having written and completed his soul-searching autobiography. "The process of writing," Tang writes, "mirrors Ravi's maturation, and signals the tremendous glimpse of a tradition which may bring him closer to his people and to the new land."[11] He "becomes aware" in the end that his "desire to tap a foreign culture from afar [has] deprived him of that sustenance and enrichment available close to home."

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[4] Tang Soo Ping, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam: Ethnicity in America and Malaysia, Two Kinds of Invisibility," *MELUS* 18.4 (1993): 85.

[5] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 84.

[6] "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 85.

[7] Tang, "Cultural Crossings: Renegotiating Identity and Belief in K.S. Maniam's *The Return*," paper read the Third International Conference of the Modern Language Association, 1996, unpublished, privately circulated copy without pagination.

[8] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 85.

[9] "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 85.

[10] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 89.

[11] Tang, "Cultural Crossings."

Many of Tang's observations are indeed to the point. There are, as she rightly points out, blind spots in Ravi's evolving consciousness. As Maniam himself concedes, Ravi's "aggressive, intellectualized attitude" towards life is ultimately "reductive in its scope."[12] It is true that Periathai's and Naina's desire to belong has a hint of spirituality about it – as does Ravi's, as we shall see. It is also true that, unlike Ellison's fictional universe (and Okri's, in which the wretchedness of marginality is always at least minimally ameliorated), Maniam's world is largely one of eternally contracting light. As a reviewer once put it, any luminescence that manages to penetrate the darkness of Maniam's world, insofar as one perceives it as luminescent at all, is (always invariably) hard-won.[13] Finally, the two forces which Tang pits against one another – the 'good' (Hindu-Indian) and the 'bad' (the West) – do play a pivotal role in shaping Ravi's life. However, for her to plot the trajectory of Ravi's life-passage as one proceeding from utopian contentment to radical alienation and finally to the awakening of the desire to reclaim his Indian roots, and to then surmise that *TR* is "inward-looking" and "predictably fixated on the ethnic [Indian] theme"[14] is to miss the point of the novel entirely.

Tang's critique of *TR* exemplifies a general tendency on the part of critics to dismiss Ravi as a colonial stooge, to quasi-idealize and at times (in)directly disclaim any idealizing of Periathai's "mythological stature"[15] and the "glamorous Indian past"[16] she apparently embodies, and to sum up *TR* as a story about Ravi's "desire to re-establish racial and ethnic origins"[17] – or worse, to "return to religious values."[18] What this kind of argument does is to ignore almost entirely the complexities of belonging and the perils of self-insularity – two themes that are foundational to *TR* and almost all of Maniam's major works. In addition, it fails to appreciate the epic significance of Ravi's twofold life-passage: first, from a compromised existence in an oppressed working-class Tamil community to a dignified life-style that only the financially

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[12] K.S. Maniam, "Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction," 222.

[13] Lang Bulan, "Fictional Landcapes that Reflect Reality," *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur; 8 November 1995): 6.

[14] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 83.

[15] Tang, "Cultural Crossings."

[16] Peter Wicks, "Maniam's Malaysian Vision," in *Asian Profile* 25.5 (1997): 390.

[17] Anne Brewster, "Linguistic Boundaries: K.S. Maniam's *The Return,*" in *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Bruce Bennett (Nedlands, W.A.: Centre for Studies of Australian Literature 1988):178.

[18] Shirley Lim, "Gods Who Fail: Ancestral Religion in the New Literatures in English from Malaysia and Singapore," *Commonwealth Novel in English* 3.1 (1984): 42.

well-off can afford; and second, from naive sense-certainty to possession of the kind of ethical self-knowledge that liberates the subject from inner alienation.

It would not be speculative to suggest that critics taking the above line of argument have been injudiciously inspired in part by certain remarks Maniam has made on his own works. Maniam has, for example, said in an interview that Ravi "shows the glimmering of a return to his culture"[19] but "cannot entirely go back to the old culture for he cannot eradicate from his consciousness the [English] education and language that he has acquired."[20] What Ravi can do is to try and combine the two worlds. The curious phrasing "cannot [...] go back [...] cannot eradicate" would seem to suggest that Maniam actually sees himself as having scripted Ravi into a position where he chooses to combine the two worlds only *after* coming to terms with the impossibility of his *true* desire to access the inaccessible (the "old culture") and to eradicate the ineradicable (the imprint of the new/foreign culture on his psyche). In other words, what Maniam's statement appears to convey is that Ravi *does* desire to return to his roots. With this apparent authorial encouragement, it is not difficult to see why some critics find it unnecessary to question whether *the text itself* actually supports the view that Ravi "shows the glimmering of a return to his culture."

The inclination of critics to agree with what Maniam appears to be saying does not seem to be motivated by the naive belief that 'authors know best.' Despite Maniam's insistence that "I'm not writing 'autobiographical' fiction,"[21] *TR* continues to be secretly read as Maniam's autobiography disguised as Ravi's. (If Ravi is Maniam, then who would know more about Ravi than Maniam himself?) It is not without reason that even a veteran critic like Anne Brewster should repeatedly describe *TR* as "K.S. Maniam's autobiographical novel" instead of Ravi's.[22] As is well known to those familiar with Maniam's writings, Ravi's life is almost identical to Maniam's. Both come

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[19] Bernard Wilson, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," *World Literature Written in English* 34.2–35.1 (1993): 17.

[20] Wilson, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," 18. Maniam's qualification here recalls Anne Brewster's argument that "*The Return* [...] suggests the desire to re-establish racial and ethnic origins but this nostalgia is mixed with the sober realization of the impossibility of this quest"; Brewster, "Linguistic Boundaries: K.S. Maniam's *The Return*," 178.

[21] Margaret Yong, "Returning to a Far Country: Can We Recover the Past? On the Biographical Trail with K.S. Maniam," *Southeast Asian Review of English* 24 (1992): 67.

[22] Brewster, "Linguistic Boundaries: K.S. Maniam's *The Return*," 173.

from a working-class background, grew up in a small isolated town, and briefly attended a Tamil school before transferring to an English one. In addition, they both completed a teacher-training course in England. Indeed, the two figures are similar in so many ways that Heather Neilson might just be right when she says that "the question of where the autobiographical matter begins and ends" is ultimately unanswerable "without recourse to Maniam himself."[23] Be that as it may, the problem remains: what are we to make of a situation where critics, while overtly engaging with *TR* as a work of *fiction*, silently slip in and out of reading Ravi's textual desire as determined by and indistinguishable from Maniam's extratextual desire, and regard Maniam's comments on *TR* as more 'authoritative' than the text itself?

Desire of the Big Mother

We should always bear in mind that due to the brevity and fragmentary nature of the few available essays by and interviews with Maniam, what might come across as the author's personal interpretation of his works is not always commensurate with his overarching thematic commitment. Nor is it always unequivocally borne out in his corresponding literary texts. In the latter part of this chapter, we will return to examine how this is connected to the negative reception Ravi typically receives from critics. For now, let us consider the issue in relation to Periathai ('Big Mother'), the first-generation immigrant whose portrayal is inspired by Maniam's real-life grandmother:

> Periathai is not only Ravi's grandmother but also the source of his intellectual, emotional and, particularly, spiritual development [… She represents] the spiritual strength and vision of a people [as well as] rhythm and vitality, characteristics often associated with creativity in Hindu mythology.[24]

Following Maniam, critics have focused almost exclusively on Periathai's nobler traits. Undoubtedly, Periathai is a "remarkable woman" whose "tenacity and resourcefulness in starting life anew with her family in a strange land" can only be admired.[25] She is the only person in Ravi's life who encourages him to complete his secondary schooling and the only one who,

[23] Heather Neilson, "The Postcolonial Child in the Fiction of K.S. Maniam and Lois-Ann Yamanaka," in *Impossible Selves: Cultural Readings of Identity*, ed. Jacqueline Lo et al. (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1999): 99.

[24] Maniam, "Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction: A Personal Reflection," 221–22.

[25] Brewster, "Linguistic Boundaries: K.S. Maniam's *The Return*," 173.

despite her meagre resources, is prepared to see him through financially. This, at a time when his father Naina would neither support nor discourage him, and when his unpredictable mother-substitute Karupi and the tyrannical estate superior Ayah are maliciously bent on cutting short his education (*TR* **101–10**). It is also from Periathai that Ravi learns "Never [to] let anything break [his] spirit" (**7**). In spite of all that, however, it would be difficult not to recognize also that the same tenacity and resourcefulness that make Periathai a remarkable figure have also been utterly ineffectual in helping her obtain the one thing she desires above all else: legal ownership of her illegally built house, which has been marked for demolition by the town council. They could not save her from being consumed by her failure and from dying "speechless, her eyes never [speaking] a farewell" (**10**). Lastly, they could not cancel out the reasons that make her vow bitterly to return after death and "never stop haunting the place" (**8**). (Later in the chapter, we will see that it is a vow she is to fulfil indirectly, with tragic consequences.)

It would be fair to say that Periathai would most likely pass away in peace (or at least without excessive emotional violence) had she not clung to the house. She has lived resourcefully and to the full, and she has done her best to establish as secure a ground as possible for her family to prosper in the new country. In all, one might say that she has not fared too badly, especially if we consider how she first came to the land "with nothing except some baggage and three boys [her sons] in tow" (*TR* **1**). So if, as it appears, Periathai has neither regrets nor unfinished business, how, then, do we account for her hysterical reaction to the eviction? Why, prior to her demise, does she blubber deliriously about the sea, melancholically crooning to it, "beseeching for a safe passage with her tin trunks" (**10**)? How is it that a woman who has taken worse in her stride (cross-continent migration, the communist threat, the Japanese occupation) and whose spirit has hitherto been indomitable can suddenly get so wrought-up over a house? Recall that, even though she suffers from terminal cancer, it is not until the town council "got to her" (**8**) that she starts to lose weight and hasten to her death.

It goes without saying that anyone whose house is about to be forcibly torn down by the authorities is bound to be distraught. With Periathai, however, her over-reaction does not seem to stem from the fear of losing the roof over her head or being turned into a destitute. If she so desired, she could have packed up and moved elsewhere, or perhaps even bought a new place to spend her remaining days preparing herself spiritually for her impending death, as traditional Hindus typically do. Money, if it is an obstacle, does not appear to be insurmountable, as may be inferred from Naina's attempt to purchase the property for her, albeit unsuccessfully, because "It isn't for sale"

(*TR* **133**). At worst, she could have moved in with Naina and his family. What, then, is it about the house that makes it so special?

For Periathai, the house whose legal title she expects to receive at no cost "on the grounds that she had occupied [it] long enough to be its rightful heir" (*TR* **8**) is clearly not just a physical shelter or even a home to be sentimentally cherished. Judging from the obsessive way in which she clings to it, it is as if the house embodied the Thing that promises to saturate her with the pleasure of 'arriving': that is, to legitimate her way of life and affirm her self-identity as a good Hindu-Indian. Here we should distinguish clearly between the impossible-real Thing (*das Ding*), Periathai's Thing and the really-existing house. The first describes the empty place around which her world of desires turns and to which she relates in a dimension of loss, regret and nostalgia. Periathai's very own Thing is, by contrast, a tangible object of desire (a house, in this case) which she has personally elevated to the level of the sublime Thing, fetishized as something worth pining and dying for. From Ravi, we know that her house is quintessentially Hindu-Indian. In it, traditional Hindu rituals are regularly performed and festivals celebrated, as if to re-create "the thick spiritual and domestic air [Periathai] must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India" (*TR* **6**). Structurally, the house has "an old-fashioned, Indian cooking place" (**4**) and a yard covered with *kolam* or Hindu threshold drawings which function as a visual index of the good Hindu woman who created them. The house is also supported by four wooden pillars whose timber faces display exquisite carvings of stories from the *Ramayana*:

> Rama challenged, bow and arrow at the ready, yet his brows lined with anxiety for the missing Sita. The sculptured, fold-like flames envelop Ravana's palace and threaten to engulf Sita's tender, shapely limbs and breasts. One pillar carried the creation of the Ganges, the cascading water stilled, another the typical, rustic look of the Indian village. (*TR* **4**)

Because Periathai's house-Thing has taken on higher functions in her world of desires (as the positivization of her lack, and the object around which her Hindu-Indian identity is structured and to which her desire is bound), it follows that the negation of one would also be the negation of the other. That would explain why Periathai reacts to the demolition threat as if what is at stake is not merely a house but the very centre of her world – her Hindu-Indian Thing, in short. To recapitulate: if the house is precious only insofar as Periathai fetishizes it, if her tenacious clinging to it is but a displaced gesture of her overpassionate, unconscious attachment to her Hindu-Indian identity, and if this attachment is what hinders her from finding a home in herself and the new land, then would it not follow that the standard treatment of Periathai

as the sacred ideal against which the 'useless' Ravi must but cannot measure up ought to be reassessed?

That Periathai dies defeated does not, of course, negate her worth as an individual. By the same token, it is not as inconsequential as might be implied by the curiously scant attention critics have given it, or as life-affirming as it has been made out to be at other times. Consider Peter Wicks's analysis, for example. Wicks claims that "The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of narrative as 'the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'."[26] He notes that there is an irreconcilable gap between Periathai's strength and her failure to establish legal ownership of her house. But instead of expanding on this, he concludes with only a hint of argument that "the semi-mythical" Periathai is a more "captivating" and "intriguing" character than Ravi.[27] Even more peculiar is Tang's take on the gap; not only does she not see Periathai's failure as failure, she even inverts it into the character's triumph, a symbol of her omnipotence. Periathai, Tang writes, "achieves some kind of mythological stature" that identifies her more as a "folk-[hero]" than a "defeated, homeless [exile]."[28]

This unfortunate tendency to treat the flesh-and-blood and warts-and-all Periathai as a mere appendix to the abstract ideal of Indian Goodness calls for a comparison with the practice of mother-fetishization in popular Indian cinema. In the latter field, the mother invariably bears the burden of Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana* and the quintessential Hindu figure of ideal womanhood. On screen, she is a fount of love, protection and traditional morality. Above all, she is Mother India, the self-sacrificing guardian of Indianness and defender against the corrupting West. To cinemagoers who have grown accustomed to the maternal norm, it is simply inconceivable and unacceptable that she should be portrayed in any other way. The Indian filmmaker Gopi Rorha had apparently so horrified cinemagoers with *Kaaren* ('Reason', 1981) when he portrayed the mother as a prostitute who is eventually killed by her own son that screening of the film ceased after three days because no one wanted to watch it.[29] *Kaaren* is an exception rather than the rule. The desire of Indian moviegoers to avoid any psychosocial anxiety that may arise from being subjected to 'disturbing' scenes (such as uncharacteristic representations

[26] Wicks, "Maniam's Malaysian Vision," 390.

[27] "Maniam's Malaysian Vision," 392.

[28] Tang, "Cultural Crossings."

[29] Rosie Thomas, "Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream Hindu Film," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995): 160.

of the mother) is almost always met by filmmakers' eagerness to cater to their enjoyment.[30] Between the two, there is normally a tacit understanding on how characters ought to find representation on screen. The burly leather-clad villain may drink and whore, the hero may err within reason, but the filmic mother must always remain chaste. Therein lies the crucial difference between our two fields of comparison: whereas mother-fetishization in Indian cinema is the result of a symbiotic collusion between cinemagoers and filmmakers, the fetishization of Periathai by critics cannot be said to have been made on legitimate textual ground.

Tang claims that Ravi unfairly relegates Periathai to a "rather tragic [role] that at times dwindled to pathos and grotesquerie."[31] The question is: what if there is no false representation here? What if Ravi's point is precisely that his grandmother is not this infallible Super-Mother standing above critique but a strong woman who is nonetheless ultimately killed by her compulsive obsession with her House-Thing? No doubt, Periathai's amiability recalls Dad, the kynical hero in Okri's *abiku* trilogy. Both are highly spirited and fiercely independent figures who 'speak the same language', judging by the counsel they impart to their (grand)son. Periathai, as mentioned earlier, calls upon Ravi to "Never let anything break [his] spirit" (*TR* **7**). Similarly, Dad teaches his son Azaro to "Grow wherever life puts you down" (*TFR* **38**). In terms of the legacy they leave behind, however, the two are anything but similar. As we have seen, even if the seemingly futile political struggle to which Dad dedicates his life yields nothing concrete – that is, even if the unborn nation continues to persist as an undead despite his heroic exertions – his 'failure' would still be a radical success for the struggle. As illustrated in the parable of the good man and the evil mosquito, this is because the future success of any revolutionary cause is always contingent upon its silent, ceaseless weaving by vanishing mediators who, like Dad, fight and, in perishing and sinking into invisibility, pave the way for others after them to advance the cause. We can try to assign Periathai the role of vanishing mediator and describe her (family) cause as driving "some stake into the country" (*TR* **140**). In attempting to do so, however, we will find not only that Periathai does not 'vanish' (as she vows she would not prior to her demise), but that she also does not 'mediate' in the positive sense of facilitating her descendants' endeavour to realize the goal. What she does unwittingly accomplish with her decline and demise as a

[30] See Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, **1993**): **67**.

[31] Tang, "Cultural Crossings."

first-generation immigrant is to set a tragic precedent which her son Naina is to end up following and her grandson Ravi is to be haunted by.

Encore!

Like his mother before him, Naina turns to the land for solace in the final stages of his life. Uncannily, the more Naina desires the desire of his mother (that is, the more he fixates on the land), the more he resembles Periathai at the time of her death. "He had the same, obsessed stare in his eyes," Ravi observes (*TR* **159**). Also, the closer he comes to his death, the worse his luck becomes. First he receives the tragic news that his son Kumar has been killed in a violent road accident. After burying his own son, he has to cope with the trauma of finding out that Kumar's body, crushed from the waist down in the accident, has to be dug up and reburied "in a proper graveyard" (**161**) because he had previously stubbornly insisted on burying it next to the house, knowing full well then that he would be breaking the law. On top of this, he faces eviction from the land he illegally occupies and on which his half-built house stands. The pressure in the end pushes him over the edge. Driven to manic religiosity and psychotic delirium, Naina sets fire to his half-built dream house before immolating himself.

Like Periathai, Naina's obsession with property, which compels him to give up "everything, [...] work, comfort and security" (*TR* **152–53**), is not simply for or about property in itself. From his traditional standpoint, the house of his dreams must be built as a family affair, with the full cognizance of the family and the involvement of the eldest son. Otherwise, Naina says, "it isn't a house" (**154**). The house should, in other words, positivize what the family lacks but should ideally possess: a homely sense of cohesion and togetherness. (According to Ravi, the "family was a work force, not a unit of affection, living together," **93**.) Likewise, the land on which Naina's uncompleted house stands is not just coveted for the "stability and security" that normally comes with land ownership, as Tang argues.[32] Instead, he appears to desire it for its fantasmatic properties, for the 'something in the land more than the land' that promises to vindicate his life-long struggle ("make it all worthwhile") and give him that absolute affirmation of his identity and belongingness to the ground beneath his feet. Like his mother, Naina does not merely desire the Thing which is unattainable but appears to seek it masochistically *because* it is unattainable. Of all the vacant plots of government land to (illegally) occupy, he has to choose one that is not for sale (**158**). This,

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[32] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," **84**.

despite having previously learned, when he tried but failed to buy the house for his mother because it, too, was not for sale, that illegal occupation of other people's land is more than likely to end in tears.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it appears that what Naina actually desires is not so much the fulfilment of his desire but *desire itself*: that is, pure desire in the shape of *jouissance* derivable from (and used to attenuate) the pain one inflicts upon oneself for no other reason than to set in motion the chain of events which we have just described. That Naina might unconsciously privilege pain over pleasure is not so implausible as it might sound. As Ellie Ragland points out, "People love their pain. They reify it and dignify it, sing praises to suffering, painting it in colors of a higher and purer reality."[33] Far from being confined to the boudoir of perverts, sadomasochism is a constitutive element in many cultural and religious practices. Parents sometimes beat and torture their child(ren) as if they know of no other way to express their love. This, according to Sarah Caldwell, is "a form of intense interaction which is at the core of the Tamil concept of family love" and which creates "a deep unconscious association between suffering (physical and mental) and nurturance, acceptance and love."[34] Indeed, pain is at times quite literally the royal road to a higher pleasure. Hindu ascetics have known this for centuries, hence their practice of austerities that range from self-deprivation such as fasting and abstinence from sex, to such extremes as lying on a bed of nails or holding their arms upright for decades, causing them to atrophy over time. The paramount goal is to mortify themselves into *samadhi*, the state of yogic *jouissance*. Periathai herself is not unfamiliar with the practice. Ravi recollects how she sometimes "forfeited her customary warm bath [and] *punished herself* with cold water" before commencing her elaborate Friday prayers (*TR* 5; my emphasis). Later in this chapter, we will see why Ravi has to reject the potentially heritable masochistic desire of "indefinite awaiting of pleasure and [...] intense expectation of pain"[35] if the cycle of the eternal return is to be broken.

Because Naina's all-consuming desire for the land and the house is, in the psychoanalytic sense, not his but his mother's, and because his passage from

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[33] Ragland, "The Discourse of the Master," 142.

[34] Sarah Caldwell, "The Bloodthirsty Tongue and the Self-Feeding Breast: Homosexual Fellatio Fantasy in a South Indian Ritual Tradition," in *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*, ed. T.G. Vaidyanathan & Jeffrey J. Kripal (Delhi & New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 344.

[35] Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (*Présentation de Sacher–Masoch, le froid et le cruel*, 1971; London & New York: Zed, 1989): 71.

struggle to grave is but a perfectly sequenced repetition of Periathai's, it stands to reason that, for all his toil, his life is ultimately neither his own nor his to autonomously direct. Unbeknownst to himself, it has always already been pre-scripted for him to relive without the option of adding anything new. Strictly speaking, then, Naina's life is not so much the same as Periathai's as it is her own, which he merely re-enacts. And as far as may be gleaned from Ravi's account, he re-enacts it without any demonstrable understanding or awareness of the deeper motivations and actual implications of his single-minded obsession to sink the pillars of the house into the clay of the land. The key significance of Naina's death is that it officially marks the first complete cycle of the recurrence of the precedent established by Periathai. His death also retroactively converts what began as the family matriarch's isolated misfortune into a potentially heritable family fate of "straining towards achievement that does not end in fulfilment."[36] The logic at work here is not unlike the logic behind the emergence of the 'superstitious' belief that certain roads with a high accident rate are 'dirty' or haunted.[37] Like Periathai's death, a single automobile accident may be attributed to any number of perfectly rational causes such as bad weather conditions and careless driving. Equivalent to Naina's death, a second road fatality at the same spot is likely to raise questions about the spiritual cleanliness of the road and whether the two accidents might not be the handiwork of the unclean. (Usually at this stage, stories previously 'forgotten' are suddenly remembered; for instance, how several workers had previously died there in a series of inexplicable 'freak' accidents while constructing the road, or how the road is supposedly built on top of an ancient graveyard.) Should a third accident occur at exactly the same spot, not only would previous suspicions of the road's hauntedness be confirmed, the rational/natural causes previously attributed to the past accidents would be re-attributed to the work of 'vengeful spirits'.

In the context of *TR*, the impending third accident should, for reasons to be made clear in the next section, claim *all* of Naina's offspring. The narrative, however, strongly suggests that Ravi is the only one among his siblings who is unfortunate enough to be conscious of and menaced by what is, in his mind's eye, shaping out to be a pattern of recurring family tragedy, and that he is the one being keenly eyed by the dark gods to bring to formal comple-

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[36] K.S. Maniam, "The Climb to Nowhere," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (**26** July **1984**): **30**.

[37] The belief that certain roads are 'unclean' or 'hungry' – that is, haunted by spirits who claim their victims by deliberately causing fatal accidents – is prevalent in Nigeria and Malaysia.

tion the family's third cycle of the eternal return. Ravi's self-designation as "the one" is not paranoiac at all. Consider his intersubjective position within the family: he is the most educated and financially well-off member of his family and the one person his father respects "more than anyone else" (*TR* **157**). Above all, he is the eldest son in a quintessentially traditional Hindu family that expects the firstborn male to "give more" (**156**). Being who he is, and despite his "wish to keep out of whatever mess [the family] might create" for themselves (**155**), Ravi – more than his siblings – is always already at the centre, expected to castrate himself symbolically like a worthy Hindu son before the "Great Fucker" (Father *qua* Law).[38] He is expected to suppress all libidinal signs of individuality and stifle his spontaneity and emotional responsiveness so long as his father still lives. What this means, in effect, is that he must renounce his wish *not* to comply unquestioningly with the ways of the family-transmitted "old culture."[39] This is the one thing he cannot do, intuitive enough as he is to know that to desire the desire of the Other is to risk repeating Periathai/Naina's life of eternal hardship. (The question of "why you're a nobody and how you can become a somebody"[40] we see germinating here is developed by Maniam in his subsequent novels *IFC* and *DP*.)

As a marked man, Ravi is dogged by a sense of imminent doom. It is as if he intuits that the bullet bearing his name is already on its way and will sooner or later hit its mark. Opaquely, he also senses that he has somehow unwittingly become a pawn in a sinister drama whose precise plot forever eludes him. We get the first intimations of this in the dark thoughts he begins to have soon after transferring to the English school: "Though I had bright dreams that night, some intolerable darkness pinched at my heart" (*TR* **25**); "That night I felt, for the first time, my troubled heartbeats" (**39**). The young scholar's hauntedness becomes more pronounced over time. Consider, for instance, his anxiety upon discovering that his only escape-route from a life of petrification on the estate is as good as sealed, should he, apart from having to overcome all the other obstacles laid in his path, fail to perform well enough in a newly introduced scholastic examination to qualify for Form One: "The year ahead stood like a rope bridge over a slimy, crocodile infested river. Could I cross over to the other bank without falling to the snouts?" (**89**).

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[38] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, **307**.

[39] Maniam, in Wilson, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," **18**. It is interesting to note that Naina, who describes his mother as someone who "didn't respect worm-eating customs, she changed them!" (*TR* **137**), is not as 'progressive' and open to change as he believes he is. As proof, consider his 'traditional' view of land and house.

[40] Maniam, in Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam.

As final and most palpable illustration, consider the scene in which Ravi casually references an obscure film he had watched:

> I stayed back after school, at least once a week, to read in the library. Or I joined the seniors in the fortnightly screening of the Cinema Club. One film I can never forget is *Odd Man Out* for it stirred me strangely. (*TR* 80)

Because *Odd Man Out* is mentioned but once, and because neither explanation nor hint is offered as to why Ravi is "stirred" by it, the reader might be forgiven for assuming that the film is Maniam's invention and that the passage, whilst intriguing, is ultimately nothing to be fussed about. In assuming thus, however, the reader would miss a crucial clue in understanding Ravi's elect status. A search in the film archives shows that *Odd Man Out* is almost certainly the 1947 film adaptation of F.L. Green's 'psychological' novel of the same name. The antihero of the film/novel is Johnny McQueen, a mortally wounded IRA leader and the object of a massive police hunt. Making his escape through the working-class neighbourhoods and slums of Belfast, he encounters a series of characters – each of whom, unbeknownst to him, is animated by a secret desire to get something out of him before he dies:

> Lukey, the young artist, sees in him a chance to paint the portrait of a mortal who, in his final agony, will disclose the enigma of existence in his face. Shell, the pathetic 'down and out', hovering between the hopes of an enormous reward and the vague promise of some wonderful Belief, wants to hand him over to whoever will yield the best bargain. Father Tom, the aged priest, no longer concerned with human conceptions of right and wrong, seeks to save his soul. Tober, the embittered medical student, wants to save his body. And Agnes, the girl who loves him, knowing the hopelessness of her love and its inevitable frustration, desires that both their lives shall end before Justice can claim her man. Each character endeavours to solve the dilemma of his own life in the ruin of Johnny's.[41]

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Ravi is stirred by the film because he identifies with Johnny, his ideal ego and the 'odd man out' of the film. He sees himself in Johnny and recognizes that they are stuck in the same proverbial boat. Both are under threat and on the run: Ravi, from the invisible hands of fate and significant figures in his life like Karupi and Ayah, who

[41] F.L. Green, *Odd Man Out* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948): cover blurb.

each harbour some pathological wish to mould him in such a way that his potentiality will never be realized; Johnny, from the long arm of the law and the secret desires of those with whom he has the ill-fortune of crossing paths. Additionally, each step they take to avert drama seems to put them right back in the middle of it, leaving them with little choice but to participate in murky events which they sense will almost certainly lead to perdition.

Structural Fate

If the thought of Tamil filmic melodrama could not but insinuate its way into our minds as we detailed the many high tragedies that have befallen Ravi and his family, that would be because *TR is* indeed, in certain respects, a melodrama. Like its filmic cousin, the problems it depicts are drawn from the everyday reality of the Indian poor. Thematically, they revolve around

> family members' transgressions of their duties towards one another; [...] comparisons of the 'nature' of the rich and poor, the relative sophistication of each, [...] the value of their different types of education; [and] tensions arising from interaction between lower-class and upper-class characters.[42]

Also like Tamil melodramas, *TR* is presented in acutely emotive and personal terms without directly drawing the reader's attention to the political underside of the crises depicted. The reader is privy to intense private moments in Periathai's and Naina's lives. He sees them mostly at their lowest, struggling to cope with one traumatic event after another (illness, mental breakdown, death). Through all of this, however, the reader never actually sees them apprehending life from a perspective that is anywhere remotely political. Not once does the text impress upon the reader that Periathai and Naina suspect that their 'bad luck' may be at least partly caused by invisible sociopolitical forces. As Ravi rightly says, albeit somewhat arrogantly, "Their imagination couldn't grasp the real complexity that surrounded us" (*TR* 140). Similarly, Ravi's understanding of the situation, while arguably more informed, is also never articulated in a way that immediately brings the political to mind. Ravi is cynically aware of the "prescribed social rules" (76) that prohibit him from speaking "pure" (75) English (the language of the ruling class) and socializing with children from the high-class "yellow territory" (76). But he never records his thoughts on these codes of social control in anything other than

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[42] Sara Dickey, "Consuming Utopia: Film Watching in Tamil Nadu," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995): 140.

personal terms. It is *he* that fate wants to entrap; *he* is made to suffer indignities at the hands of Ayah; and his family wants *him* to compromise *his* desire. As with the rest of the predominantly Indian characters in the novel, Ravi's world is so far removed from politics that momentous national events such as the Japanese occupation of Malaya are referenced but casually, and independence is received as if it is merely an incidental half-curiosity:

> One night, while we were still at work on the clothes, we heard Tunku Abdul Rahman, our Prime Minister, on the radio, uttering the words: *Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!*
>
> So Independence came to us. Its immediate signs were the further reduction of the curfew hours and in the kind of goods displayed on the pavement stalls. (*TR* 131)

Given these real-life, emotive, personal and non-political elements of the melodrama in *TR*, it is not surprising that Tang, faithful to her method, should argue that the novel lacks "engagement with the larger multi-cultural society," that it focuses too exclusively on "the ethnic theme" and therefore lacks "a sense of Malaysianness."[43] Sharing her concern to an extent is Shirley Lim, who writes, albeit in less polemical terms, that "an [unknowledgeable] reader may well believe Malaysia to be, even if pluralistic, an Indian-dominated nation, or at least not a Malay-dominated country."[44] Tang and Lim, admittedly, have a point. From one angle, *TR* can appear the way they describe it. But we have to ask: is that all there is to the novel? Have they perhaps forgotten to approach the text tangentially and consider how the narrative might alert the reader to issues confronting Malaysian society "through omission rather than inclusion"?[45] In any case, can it honestly be said that the almost ethnically homogeneous cast robs *TR* of its "Malaysianness," a highly loaded and problematic term if ever there was one?

Reading *TR* against the grain, we will find that although the novel has its moments of melodrama, it also departs from it in at least one crucial way. Maniam draws his material for the crises he depicts from the same archives as filmic Indian melodrama and depicts them in the same emotive and personal terms, but he does not offer the reader unrealistic, fantastic resolutions that may nourish hopes that a spectacularly easier life is attainable. The manner in

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[43] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 82–83.

[44] Lim, "Gods Who Fail," 49.

[45] K.S. Maniam, "The Malaysian Novelist: Detachment or Spiritual Transcendence," in *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Bruce Bennett (Nedlands, W.A.: Centre for Studies of Australian Literature, 1988): 168.

which the story concludes is neither happy in the escapist sense nor "achieved at the cost of repression – repression of real-life experiences, knowledge, and fears that would contradict the facility of the melodramatic solution."[46] Of course, even without the sugar-coating, *TR*'s political underside is still not entirely self-evident. But consider what it *does* reveal: a disquieting reflection of a community stifled "within the unmoving air of a clearing: geographical, mental, cultural and spiritual."[47] Now, given this, the reader might choose to worry that a lesser reader may come away with the false impression that Malaysia is overrun by Indians, or he might perhaps find it more worthwhile to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the community's decay. He might ask, for instance, how this symbolic snapshot of life for migrants and their children in the early days of Malaya/Malaysia differs from the present, and what this, in turn, says about the nation and its postcolonial ideals.

Although, as we saw, the fate of the eternal return runs in Ravi's family and perpetuates itself down the bloodline (as evinced by Naina's unconscious inheritance of his mother's desire, and his desire to share it with the horrified Ravi), it is not just a 'family thing'. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we know that Ravi's family is not unlike the rest of the working-class, lower-caste, and semi-dysfunctional Tamil-Indian community in Malaya/Malaysia which has, for generations from the colonial days of mass migration to the present, been structurally crippled from birth and primed to remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As discussed in Chapter 2, decades of being subjected to systematic exploitation has trapped the community in a vicious cycle of economic dispossession and circumscribed life-opportunities. The result has been the fossilization of a subculture of woundedness (characterized by a crippling sense of worthlessness, apathy, and self-loathing) which has, over several generations, led to the 'forgetting' of the actual underlying causes of the 'Indian dilemma' in Malaysia. Perversely, their backwardness has even at times been perceived as the *result* of their inherent backwardness. In one of its publications, INSAN (Institute of Social Analysis, Malaysia) confirms what most Malaysians already tacitly know: that many middle-class Indian Malaysians feel "indignant that these people [the working-class Indians] are always whining, begging and quarrelling, instead of taking steps to improve themselves."[48] It is possible that some of them feel that way because they honestly believe that "these people" give the entire Indian community a bad name. It is

[46] Dickey, "Consuming Utopia: Film Watching in Tamil Nadu," 137.

[47] Maniam, "The Climb to Nowhere," 30.

[48] Institute of Social Analysis Malaysia, *Sucked Oranges: The Indian Poor in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: INSAN, 1989): 26.

equally possible, however, that they might, without admitting it to themselves, secretly derive malicious enjoyment from the misfortune of poor and down-trodden Indian Malaysians.

In *TR*, the higher-caste Ayah and Amah never tire of "eroding whatever self-confidence [Ravi has] developed" and ensuring that he feels like "a dhobi's son [who] could never dream of being more" (*TR* **95**). Whenever Ravi goes over to their house to collect dirty laundry, they make him "sit on the bottom step instead of at the doorway" (**94**), as if he were a beggar – which is precisely the term Amah uses to insult Ravi on one occasion (**83**). Feigning benevolent concern, Ayah, rather than encouraging Ravi to improve himself, urges him to be "a dutiful son and help the family" and not bring misfortune upon them with his "book ideas" (**98**). Even when Ravi's family manages to achieve a small measure of independence after Naina sets up his own laundry business, Ayah continues to find opportunities to enjoy Ravi's pain in person. Visiting the shop one day – royally, without alighting from his Mercedes – he unloads a batch of dirty laundry, looks at Ravi, turns to Naina and says with "a vengeful gleam in his eyes": "You're still washing my clothes!" (**133**). Deferentially, Naina replies in Tamil that "Each man makes his way in life as best as he can" (**133**). Ravi, surprisingly, keeps his silence, although one suspects he would have liked to break out into song:

> When we say:
> 'We have no homes,
>   no land,
> no fields,
>   and no crops,
> There is no salvation,'
>
> They say:
> 'You have strong hands,
>   Use them for begging bowls
> There are plenty of towns
>   Can we help you in any other way?
> Be off with you.'
>
> They make us beggars
>
> When we tell them about the weeds,
> They teach us how to kill the crop.
> […]
> They will push a man to his death.
>
> When we ask them how to start something,
> they tell us to end everything.
>
> […]

When we say:
'Tamils have no education,
no energy,
no support,
and no guts
No one helps them,'

They say:
'You have bellies
fill them up.
You have dreams,
it's time to sleep.
There's nothing to worry about.
Just eat and sleep.'

[…]

When you ask how to improve yourself,
they will tell you the riddles of the universe.
When we say:
'Tamils have no greatness,
no unity
and no possibility
of changing any of this,'

They say:
'There are platforms,
and speeches
and great leaders.
Here is a garland,
and here is my neck;
what other unity do you need?'[49]

The above 'tune', a poem by I. Ulaganathan, nicely captures our point on the working-class Indian community in Malaysia. Not only has its members been thrown into a world not of their own choosing, their well-off cousins, who are in a position to help, instead conspire to perpetuate and enjoy their oppression. Even the Indian-Malaysian political class, which has been entrusted with the future of its constituents, has proven to be largely ineffectual.[50] Its

[49] I. Ulganathan, "Ask and You Shall Receive," in *The Interior Landscape of the Heart: Tamil Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Anand Haridas & R. Dhandayudham (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, **1981**): **20–23**.

[50] On the failure of the Indian Malaysian political class to uplift the Indian community, especially the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), see, for example, Simon Ele-

infamous politics of self-adulation, cronyism, petty squabbles, and personal enrichment has contributed greatly to the backwardness of the working-class Tamil-Indian community. Because the community's dilemma has improved little if at all since the nation's founding more than four decades ago, it stands to reason that, in retrospect, each and every generation of working-class Tamils in the country has always been structurally fated, primed to re-live their immigrant forefathers' circumscribed life. It is for this reason that all of Naina's offspring are, as indicated earlier, ripe for picking by fate.

Being Responsible

Family dynamics and structural categories like class and race delimit our existence in more ways and more profoundly than we often consciously realize. Yet, as is often forgotten, they are *not* all-determining. If they were, Ravi would not have escaped from the ill fate that beset Kumar early in life. (Kumar was Ravi's prematurely aged brother and the archetypal filial Hindu son in *TR*. Lorry attendant by day and petrol pump attendant by night, he died in a violent road accident before his potential was even half-realized.) Nor should Ravi have succeeded in acquiring the 'forbidden' white-collar skills that would at the minimum guarantee him "a comfortable, unthreatened" life of economic security (*TR* 140).

Contrary to critics' portrayal of Ravi as someone who passively submits to the chain of causes that determine his conduct, Ravi – as we shall see – is the only one in the novel who recognizes the three key lessons in *TR*: first, that one's "relation with tradition should not be one of submission and repetition, but of transformation and critique";[51] second, that meaningful belongingness is not contingent upon the coming into possession of one's impossible Thing; and third, that one's potentiality is ultimately determined by one's actualization of it, not by one's structural fate or the transcendental beyond. Of course, this is far from saying that Ravi is perfect. He is, in fact, as deeply flawed and as incapable of real happiness as the rest of Maniam's trademark tragic protagonists like Krishnan ('Arriving'), Muniandy ('The Cord') and Rajan (*IFC*). Nevertheless, one has to admit that there is something to be admired about his shouldering the task of critically examining himself being aware of himself being aware of the world. This will-to-know rather than to cripple himself (more than he already is by his structural positioning) by carrying in his heart and head his family's insular world-view is, curiously, seldom given

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gant, "Big Daddy," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (20 April 2000).

[51] Laclau, *New Reflections*, 179.

its due weight by critics. As noted earlier, it is usually either passed over in silence or, if brought up, invariably inverted into incontrovertible evidence of his 'betrayal' of his Hindu-Indian culture. Things become all the more curious if we take into account how integral the notions of agency and freedom are in *TR* and, indeed, almost all of Maniam's works. In the preface to his collection of short stories *Haunting the Tiger*, Maniam writes:

> What is that passionate concern or commitment that has been the fuel [...]? It has to do with breaking out, with pushing the frontiers of consciousness further away from the purely social, political and cultural centre [...] The writing tries to unearth the hidden resources of the man or woman beleaguered by unacceptable social, political and cultural visions and practices.[52]

At its heart, Maniam's philosophical approach to life and literature is not unlike Okri's as discussed in Part II. Just as Okri postulates the overcoming of consciousness' humiliation as foundational to the unearthing of one's infinite riches, Maniam sees "the transformation of leaden consciousness into the knowledge that [surpasses] understanding"[53] as the pivotal precondition "for developing a fuller attitude towards life and the appreciation of man's manyfold talents."[54] In Maniam, as in Okri, this requires more than pointing the accusing finger at others ('*you* did this to me'; '*they* corrupted us'). Infinitely less pleasurable, it calls for the recognition of and owning up to one's blameworthiness, one's complicity in the creation and perpetuation of the very dilemma one faces. In Lacanian terms, it necessitates the traversal of fantasy, a full recognition of whom I always already was: namely, the effect of causal determination who makes the relation between the cause and its effect possible.

Before we elucidate how Ravi might or might not be said to traverse his fantasy by the conclusion of *TR*, it would be useful first recall a few key concepts we covered previously but will encounter again later. For better contrast, let us proceed via Maniam's 'Booked for Life' (*BFL*),[55] a short story which is thematically more intimately related to *TR* than first meets the eye. *BFL* revolves around the life of Mary Lim, a college lecturer and "a hard, hard

[52] K.S. Maniam, *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia* (London: Skoob, **1996**): x.

[53] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **21**.

[54] Maniam, "Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction," **219**.

[55] Compiled in Maniam, *Arriving ... and Other Stories*.

woman" (**23**). In her world, men are corrupters of women, the neighbours in their dark skins are disgusting, and her maturing teenage son is fast turning into a version of his father, the allegedly conniving Indian lecher who is her ex-husband. Mary is simply unable to recognize that her world is 'bitter and twisted' because she herself has framed it that way. In her eyes, the wicked ways of the world exist independently of her participation and there can be no changing her mind about that. As she chastizes herself when her self-certainty falters, "Don't tell me I don't understand my own mind. Don't tell me I keep secrets from myself" (**50**). What Mary misrecognizes is not, of course, the self of her symbolic identification but the fundamental fantasy that supports her universe of self-experience – the way things actually, objectively seem to her even if they don't seem that way to her, to paraphrase Žižek.[56] A person may have several core fantasies but there is, in Lacanian discourse, one fantasy, an unconscious one for most of us, that is absolutely fundamental. This absolutely fundamental fantasy is the very frame through which the subject gains access to reality. It colours his entire existence, influences his orientation in life, the way he relates to other people including parents and lovers, and his capacity for sexual satisfaction. Like the Gordian knot, the fundamental fantasy holds together the ontological consistency of the subject's self-experience. Cut the knot and his world would fall apart. (Recall, for example, the way in which Periathai's world collapses when she loses her fetishized house.)

Mary's fantasy is constructed around the empty space occupied by the fantasmatic figure of her former husband, Suresh. Initially eroticized as Siddhartha, "the handsome, incorruptible prince of men" (*BFL* **34**), Suresh quickly loses his godly radiance after the birth of their socially stigmatized Chindian[57] son, Michael. Gradually he unfolds into a gift of shit, an object desublimated of the dignity of the Thing:

> "He was a sneaky one, that Suresh," […] 'You can't make the leopard change its spot for something else. He only pretended to play the domesticated father. I hear he's still going from woman to woman, leaving his trademark behind. Wouldn't he have left something behind in Michael? Not just the genetics. Something only his crafty mind can scheme up?' (*BFL* **43–44**)

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[56] Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, **83**.

[57] 'Chindian' refers to a person of mixed Chinese-Indian parentage.

By being daily obsessed with Suresh's real and/or imagined evil deeds and the countless ways her life continues to be poisoned by them, Mary is able to avoid having to confront her fear and suspicion that there is, and has always been, something 'dirty' inside her "waiting to be stroked into motion" (*BFL* 33). What she does not realize is that any content that is repressed always returns as symptoms. In Lacan's words, "what is foreclosed in the symbolic reappears in the real."[58] In Mary's case, it reappears as irrational guilt, persecution-complex, obsessive compulsion to cleanliness and order, and incestuous dreams about her teenage son. As her supreme symptom, imaginary poison trickles daily from her withered nipples, a foul-smelling excrescence she takes perverse pleasure in cleansing and reviling as "the ugliness and filth women inherit from men" (62). Every day it reminds her of the possibility that she might be a Putana at heart. (In Hindu mythology, Putana is the female demon that tried to kill the infant god Krishna with her poisoned breasts/milk. The name is invoked here to symbolize the source of contaminated love, the kind that kills even as it nurtures.[59])

Mary's tragedy is that although her fantasy surrounding that "bastard" Suresh (*BFL* 40) happily distracts her from her fear and suspicion of being unclean, it also creates what it purports to conceal, its repressed point of reference. That is to say, hidden by her paranoid construction is the fact that there is nothing to hide in the first place. Mary is and never was the inherently besmirched and outwardly corrupting horror her fantasy purports to conceal. From the omniscient narrator, we know that her neurosis is a reactive formation to her 'anal' parents, to their having soundly inculcated in her such lessons as the importance of keeping her Chinese blood undiluted and her culture pure (41), the impropriety of giving expression to emotion, and the etiquette of bearing pain "stoically, even heroically" (40).

The key question that concerns *BFL* as much as *TR* is this: if the imaginary excrescence 'in Mary that is more than Mary' exists only insofar as its existence is presupposed by Mary, and if her presupposition of its existence is the founding gesture upon which her entire bitter life is built, whose fault is it? Is Mary accountable for the idiosyncratic way in which she relates to the world, or should the blame be absorbed by the Other (her parents, husband, son and so on)? Ethically speaking, are *we* answerable for our fundamental fantasy, our unconscious choice of neurosis? For instance, if I were a Cau-

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[58] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, 131.

[59] For a discussion of the Putana myth, see Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi, Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1981): ch. 5.

casian male whose excessive fascination with Asian women compelled me to pursue the objects of my desire obsessively to the detriment of my well-being (and the well-being of the objects I pursue), would I be answerable for my passion – or, rather, my erection, "one of the last remainders of authentic spontaneity, something that cannot be thoroughly mastered through rational-instrumental procedures"?[60] Am I the master of my fetish, or am I – horror of horrors – *it*, this point of pure desire palpitating beyond the pleasure principle? Analogously, if the leader of a political party is compelled by the voice of God (the categorical imperative of his conscience) to impose some grotesque form of religious law upon the multireligious population of the country to which he belongs, and if this leads to the oppression, if not extirpation, of the 'infidel' half of the population, should he be held responsible for his action if he argues in self-defence that although he feels for the victims, there is nothing he can do about it, since he is only a humble agent–instrument of Divine Necessity? Apropos of *TR*: are Periathai and Naina accountable for the installation of the Hindu-Indian Thing at the centre of their world? Are they responsible for the good and bad, and the pain and pleasure they derive from being faithful to it unto death? Are they autonomous individuals who volitionally chose their own Absolute and therefore their destiny, or are they just simple folks who know not what they do?

In Lacanian theory, the subject is always fully responsible for the maxim guiding his action: "the determination of the subject by the other is always the subject's self-determination."[61] Of course, the subject is the effect of causal determination. But he is also the 'stumbling block' in the relation between cause and its effect: that is, the active mediator who makes the causal relation possible. As Zupančič writes: "it may well be that you were dragged along by the torrent of (natural) necessity, but in the final analysis it was you who made this cause the cause. There is no cause of the cause of your action; the cause of the cause can only be the subject itself."[62] For that reason,

> any immediate reference to my nature ('What can I do, I was made like this!') is false; my relationship to the impulses in me is always a mediated one, i.e., my impulses determine me only insofar as I recognize them, which is why I am fully responsible for them.[63]

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[60] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, **385**.
[61] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, **126**.
[62] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, **34**.
[63] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, **126**.

If the self for which I am fully responsible is not found-given but self-posited, and if this self-posited self is the obstacle standing in the way of my self-overcoming, then what steps can I take to overcome myself? The answer in Lacan is, of course, *la traversée du fantasme*, the authentic act of traversing the fantasy wherein I (the subject *qua* analysand) come to identify with the real of my desire, recognizing myself in my own unacknowledged motivations, in the censured chapters and verses of my self-expression. That is how we should read the Freudian formulation, *wo es war, soll ich werden*: "you, the subject, must identify yourself with the place where your symptom already was; in its 'pathological' particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being."[64] By journeying in its entirety the path of the determination of his actions, the subject will arrive at the true knowledge of his symptom, simultaneously dissolving it, thereby reconciling himself with himself. This "act of knowing is in itself an act of liberation from unconscious coercion."[65]

Traversing the fantasy necessarily leads to the total annihilation of the self and its re-creation *ex nihilo*. In Maniam's words, it results in the "death of a very restricting self"[66] and its replacement "by a paradigmatic self that is capable of encompassing more."[67] In Chapter 3, we saw this exemplified by the flamenco dancer who leaps into the terrifying unknown and returns transformed, shining with a new, fiery stature. In Okri's *abiku* trilogy, Dad undergoes not one but multiple cycles of symbolic death and rebirth. With each cycle, he becomes stronger and more powerful. Even from these few illustrations, it is clear that the cure of 'going through' the fantasy is beneficial. It is also clear that we should, if we love ourselves, desire it for ourselves. In psychoanalysis, however, the fundamental maxim is that we never really desire it, even when we claim and insist that we really do want to change. The basic position of the subject of desire is one of a refusal of knowledge, a will not to know the why and wherefore of his symptoms. He would rather cling to his *jouissance* (his pleasure-in-pain, the precious self-defining memories he has woven around his symptoms) than 'let go' of himself and risk ending up in an entirely new world of existence in which the old no longer functions as

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[64] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 75.

[65] Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London & New York: Verso, 1994): 25.

[66] Maniam, in Annie Greet, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam at the Flinders University of South Australia," *CRNLE Reviews Journal* 1 (1991): 8.

[67] Maniam, in Lynette Mary Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University, Sydney, 1998): 109.

reliable reference-points. The fear of self-erasure is real, but the subject does not realize that although the fear is real, it is also ultimately groundless, since it belongs to the very subject who will no longer be around to experience the loss as a loss.

In *BFL*, the awakening moment of the 'loss of the loss' never arrives. Mary moves no closer to renouncing the obscene enjoyment she derives from being bitter and blaming the world for it. To compound this, she even lures a concerned male friend, Mr. Tan, to her house and then proceeds to goad and coerce him to put his lips to her nipples and suck out the 'poison' in her. Hesitatingly and partly driven by the desire to 'give it to her' so that she might become less frigid, Mr. Tan complies, not realizing that in doing so he unwittingly becomes instrumental in converting Mary's unfounded fear of being a Putana into reality. Similarly, in *TR*, Periathai and Naina never 'get over' themselves. They die clinging to the fantasy that the Other (life, fate, the town council, etc.) has stolen their 'treasure', the house (*qua* Hindu-Indian Thing) of their desire. Right up to the bitter end, they refuse to own up to the fact that their Thing has the authority to confer upon them the completion they desire only insofar as they themselves authorize it. By their own volition, they made this cause their cause, not as something subordinate to them but as their absolute Cause. For that reason, the argument that 'they have no choice' (except to cling to their house-Thing) or that 'they know not what they do' (because they are simple and uneducated) can only be taken as false. In the final analysis, they have authorized their own incompletion.

The Beautiful Soul

It is clear that the kind of transformation Maniam's works seek is not simply a matter of changing one's opinion on particular issues or deciding on whether to adopt or not adopt this or that destiny. It also does not call for the hacking-away of one's cultural roots or the replacement of one set of religious ideals with another. What is demanded of the subject, rather, is simply a shift in the way he relates to his Thing. The subject has only to journey from sense-certainty (consciousness which takes what it sees as obvious) through perception (critical consciousness of oneself being aware of oneself being aware of the world) to absolute knowledge (identification with the repressed pathological particularity that gives consistency to one's being).

In *TR*, the only character who rises to this challenge and whose life-trajectory closely parallels the movement of consciousness we have just mapped is none other than Ravi. In his early days of sense-certainty, life was idyllically unproblematic. He remembers its romantic earthiness, the wonder of his first *Deepavali* (the Hindu festival of light), the communal cooking and feasting,

and the cultural taboos and old wives' tales that enchanted his imaginative world. He remembers the "echoed voices among the hills" that the children occasionally heard and took as "the chanting and tinkling of banana-tree spirits dancing in the courtyard at night" (*TR* **14**). As well, he remembers the vivid realness of fair Hindu gods and goddesses who fought evil "in battles that clashed over our sleeping heads" (**14**). "There was a lot of colour in our invisible world" (**14**), Ravi writes. It was "a special country [...] more tangible than the concrete one we flitted through every day" (**13–14**). Ravi's sense-certainty dissipates into thin air the day he is plucked from the Tamil school in which he is enrolled and placed in the English school by Naina (at the crazy behest of Karupi, who claims that a formally attired axe-wielding white man had appeared to her in a dream and ordered Ravi's transfer). "The world I had known fell apart," as Ravi dramatically puts it (**20**). In place of the comforting familiarity of his hitherto cocooned existence, he now faces the radical alterity of the English school, which simultaneously impresses and intimidates with its colonial façade and clinical atmosphere. In place of the specially imported Tamil textbooks, he is issued with glossy English schoolbooks whose dazzling and colourful pages are capable of transporting him "into a pleasant, unreachable [Eng]land" (**24**). And in place of Murugesu, his quirky former teacher from India, he has Miss Nancy, an expatriate English teacher whose obsession with cleanliness, order and discipline is as pathological as Mary Lim's in *BFL*. For Ravi, Miss Nancy, despite her unconcealed racism towards her pupils, is an endless source of wonder. The repertoire of English children's stories she regularly tells in class, particularly the (Enid Blyton-like) tales of a blue-eyed, tawny-haired boy named Ernie and his flower-munching horse called Dobbin, cannot but give wings to his imagination. Ravi is also strangely pleasured by the often-terrifying lessons in Western-style personal hygiene which Miss Nancy imparts with the keenness of a demented prison warden. They inspire him to draw comparisons between the colonial education he now receives and life as it was in the old days under Murugesu's tutelage. In one instance, reappraising the Hindu initiation ceremony Murugesu guided him through once, he reaches the following conclusion:

> Though the central figure in the ceremony, I had felt I was the least important person in the gathering. I could have been an age-old pebble, confirmed in its existence only because they had discovered it [… Whereas] Miss Nancy made me feel I was a discovery in myself. (*TR* **30**)

Young Ravi's fateful entry into the new world of the English school clearly coincides with his awakening to the fact that there is more of the world to be discovered than he had previously realized. At this very point of rupture, he could have, had he wanted to, run away from the question of why the colonial

other is so fascinating and if it is truly as inherently and fascinatingly Other as it appears. But instead of running away, he faces it, tries to engage with it and fathom its enigma. In the process of doing so, he expands the boundaries of his self-understanding. These actions hardly qualify Ravi as the out-and-out Sloterdijkian sucker imagined by critics who treat his infidelity to his roots as inexorable evidence of his seizure-neutralization by colonial ideology. By the same token, it would not be accurate, either, to say that Ravi does not at one point lose himself in his fascination with Otherness. One might, for example, point to his over-enthusiasm in soaking up the 'alien' culture of the English. Ravi is at one point in time as mentally colonized as the "white monkeys" – his schoolmates' anglomaniacal fathers, who swagger aggressively in public (as though they thought themselves superior because they follow the English ways), go to great lengths to get their children to master English, and mock Naina for clinging "to the Tamil tongue and Indian religious practices so tenaciously" (*TR* **18**). What we have to ask here is: what if all the drama is necessary? What if Ravi has to 'lose himself' (misrecognize his unfreedom) and 'go through hell' (traverse his fantasy) before he can 'return to himself' (attain true freedom in the act of recognizing himself as the cause of the cause of his actions)?

Here we need to bear in mind that one does not and cannot leap directly from sense-certainty to absolute (self-)knowledge without first working through the contradictions in one's self-conception. In the same way, Ravi cannot choose himself as a free subject without first recognizing his unfreedom, the fact that he has, despite his cocksureness in the independence of his will to self-determination, always already been determined, 'carried along' by what we may term his English-Thing. The crucial twist here is that he must recognize himself not simply as the inert causal effect of his relation to his Thing but as the effect of a cause which, although he did not consciously posit it as his Absolute, is nevertheless his/himself. In other words, he must attribute to himself the unconscious decision involved in the incorporation of the English-Thing as the Law of his Heart. He must then be able to say to himself, 'I now know that I do not have to subordinate myself to the Thing of my desire just so that I might feel worthy of love or have the right of existence. The reason is because ultimately *I am my Thing*. It is *I* who has the authority to confer upon myself the belongingness I seek.' It is only when Ravi reaches this point that he may attain true freedom or, in Maniam's words, come "into the knowledge that [surpasses] understanding."[68] This, as we shall see later in

[68] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **21**.

our discussion, applies as much on the level of the personal as it does on the political.

To flesh out the logic of freedom we have just described, let us continue tracing the movement of Ravi's consciousness towards its supercession. Earlier, we saw how his transfer to the English school simultaneously cures him of his naivety and plunges him into a world of uncertainty. We have also seen how he quickly gains some sense of equilibrium and starts to take pleasure in forming new knowledge about his world. Now, out of this, a new self-consciousness emerges – one that is increasingly precious about itself and overconfident that it is "something that *exists on its own account*."[69] As Ravi himself says, "One's world was, after all, private, and it was only through chance encounters, as had been Miss Nancy's and mine, that one discovered the logic and the power that sustains the individual" (*TR* **140**). Consider, as further illustration of Ravi's newfound preciousness, the following scene. One day after listening to Miss Nancy's story about a dominatrix-like Snow White giving her servile dwarfs a severe tongue-lashing for messing up her house, Ravi returns home with a "craving for order" (**37**). To satisfy this strange craving,

> I appropriated a corner of the front room – the trestle bed had been knocked down – for myself. I marked off a cubicle with chalk. No one could step into that imaginary room. I kept all my school things and I often read or wrote there [...] Once I stepped over the fictitious line I couldn't be disturbed. An imperturbable insulation cut off the happenings in the other parts of the house. Sometimes my mother came rushing in, grabbed me by the shoulders and beat me [for not watching over my brother].
> [...]
> Gradually, however, the family respected my self-imposed isolation. It was the brightest corner in the room and soon attracted admirers.
> "Don't disturb him! He's reading," my mother said if any child crawled close to the lines.
> I rigorously drew these demarcations, not for myself but for them. My mother didn't even dare sweep that corner – I did it myself with a salvaged wooden-handled broom. (*TR* **37–38**)

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[69] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, foreword by J.N. Findlay (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, **1952**; Oxford: Oxford UP, **1977**): **481**.

Ravi's staking-out of his own personal space amidst the household chaos is an obvious attempt at asserting his individuality, not to mention a pragmatic move to ensure that he has a quiet place to go to when he needs to study or escape momentarily from the family bustle. Additionally – and this is the crucial part – the act mirrors the folding-back of Ravi's consciousness into itself, as if "in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being."[70] Like the Hegelian figure of Beautiful Soul who "flees from contact with the actual world" in order to "preserve the purity of its heart,"[71] Ravi turns "away from the God who ruled [his] people" (*TR* 79). He refuses to participate in the dirty games regulated by the unwritten sociosymbolic rules which empower people like Ayah to keep them in subjection. Also, he withdraws from his family, which he regards with a degree of condescension and a not-unjustified fear of being pulled down by them and turned into another victim of the eternal return:

> Only my studies mattered. I was at them constantly, aware that I could go to England if I won a teaching bursary. Naina's interests and my family's struggles became unimportant. The dignity of the individual was the only thing that engaged me. And this couldn't be acquired if I gave in to quirkish desires and irrational dreams. My father had surrendered to some secret grief at Periathai's death and borrowed indiscriminately to salve a non-existent pride.
> [...]
> It was amusing to watch the family repair its broken image. (*TR* 140–41)

Ravi's strategy of staying out of the family's "mess" (*TR* 155) is hardhearted, to say the least. But lest we forget, it is a strategy that in the end yields him what was denied his father and grandmother: a comfortable, unthreatened life of economic security. This is by no means an empty victory, even if it comes at the high price of estrangement from his family, as it proves that the curse of the eternal return (the 'material' half of it, at this point) *is* ejectable into the past. There is, of course, the other 'existential' half of the curse to be taken care of. For despite the solace Ravi derives from his English-Thing, the desiderated sense of belonging continues to elude him, just as it always eluded his father and grandmother. He remains unreconciled within, abstracted from the world, pining away for "the snow-capped isolation and the gentleness of the buttercupped meadows" of Ernie and Dobbin (39). Ravi's two-year sojourn in England appears to have somewhat attenuated his

[70] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 400.
[71] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 400.

fascination with his Thing. "The snow wasn't as white as I had imagined it to be," Ravi writes (**147**). Similarly, Ernie, who had hitherto been his secret ego-ideal, turns out to be not so unique, appearing as he does "among the many faces [he had seen] in that midland town or in London." It is not until his father's suicide, though, that a radical break occurs. Naina and Periathai are no more, he writes, but they are still vivid in his mind (**172**). On that note, he closes his autobiographical novel with a poem containing "an immature and tormenting recognition" he had written with "difficulty and uncertainty":

"Full Circle"
(for Naina)

Have you been lost
for words?

Have you been lost
for words when
you had them stacked
like images in a dream?

Have you been lost for words
when they imprisoned
your flesh, your thoughts,
feelings that rose with the wind?

Have you been lost?

Then words will not serve.
They will be like the culture
you refused at adolescent,
drinking from the tap
instead of the well.

The dregs at the bottom
of well water is the ash
of family prayers you rejected
The clay taste
the deep-rootedness
you turned aside from –
for the cleanliness of chlorine.

Words will not serve.

You'll be twisted by them
into nameless little impulses
that roam dark city roads, raging.
They will be vague knots
of feelings, lustreless, cultureless,
buried in a heart that will not serve. (*TR* **173**)

Full Circle: The Spirit Returns to Itself

Although it is clear to everyone that 'Full Circle' marks *the* turning-point in Ravi's life, there is surprisingly little agreement on the direction his life is supposed to take or even what it is exactly that he is supposed to recognize. Tang, for instance, reads the poem as a meditation on the price of alienation which Ravi has to pay for steering clear of the "struggle to achieve identity that had so tormented his grandmother and his father."[72] Shirley Lim, on the other hand, interprets it as Ravi's acknowledgment of the poignant fact that it takes his father's death to "resacralize" his "empty and passionless" middle-class world and to return him to the spiritual values of his people, as is arguably attested to by his participation in Naina's traditional burial ceremony.[73] Lynette Tan, for her part, ties the poem to Ravi's recognition of "his former self as victim to an excess of individualistic materialism."[74]

"Full Circle" is open-ended enough to contain many interpretations at once, including the three outlined above, but it does not in itself contain the answer to Ravi's recognition. The answer is, in fact, always already decided, concealed-implicit in the sense one makes of the central characters' respective struggles. That is, if the reader decides from the outset that Periathai and Naina remain unerring throughout the novel and that Ravi is wrong to believe that they should not have clung so tenaciously to their Hindu-Indian Thing, then the logical conclusion would have to be that Ravi's "tormenting recognition" is an awareness of the errors of his ways, one that must necessarily return him to the roots he had previously rejected. That would, in effect, make *TR* a novel about the importance of being a self-enclosed monad. The problem with this position is that it runs directly counter to the textual evidence we have examined, not to mention the spirit of Maniam's politics. Suffice it to recall, as I emphasized earlier, that the practical challenge in Maniam lies in self-supercession, in "breaking out" and "pushing the frontiers of consciousness"[75] – *not* in recoiling into oneself like Beautiful Soul. In Hegelian terms, it requires the subject to undergo a series of progressive movements in consciousness – more precisely: from sense-certainty through perception to absolute knowledge.

If a nativist return to the roots is ruled out, then what other plausible options could there be? My contention is that Naina's death over his Thing is the

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[72] Tang, "Cultural Crossings."

[73] Lim, "Gods Who Fail," **43**.

[74] Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'," **124**.

[75] Maniam, *Haunting the Tiger*, x.

trigger that makes Ravi realize for the first time that he too had erred and been as guilty as his family, whose dirty laundry he had hitherto aired with little restraint. Like Periathai and Naina, Ravi had submitted to the amazing Thing of his desire, taken its Law as inviolable, and acted as if only his Thing and no one else's had "the logic and the power" to sustain the individual (*TR* 140). He had believed himself free when he was in actual fact under its hypnotic spell, transfixed and "lost for words" (173) in powerless over-fascination with it. In allowing his consciousness to be thus humbled, he had, like them, *ipso facto* committed what Giorgio Agamben calls the ethically "evil" act of living "in a deficit of existence."[76] That is to say, Ravi had deprived himself of a fuller existence and the opportunity to "discover wider and more inclusive centres for the understanding and assimilation of larger areas of life."[77]

Unlike Naina and Periathai, however, Ravi is luckier. If the poem bears witness to his *past* errors, then it would not be unjustified to argue that he has also, apart from having clawed his way out of poverty, come 'full circle', 'returned to himself' in consciousness – not as the same person previously lost in alienation but as he who now recognizes himself as his own work, as the one who precedes his Cause. Hence he is no longer enthralled by and hostage to his mythic Thing. Nor does he feel like enchaining himself to some other people's Thing – for instance, by practising again the rites and rituals he had "refused at adolescent" (*TR* 173). After all, culture, like words, is 'not-all' (*pas-tout* in Lacanese): "Then words will not serve. / They will be like the culture / you refused." Culture is not the unfailing truth of one's being but the effect of its absence, a systematic notation of all past failed attempts to capture one's essence beyond the wall of language. For this very reason, culture should not be blindly clung to – or worse, transmitted unchanged in content and form to future generations so that one's present existence might obtain (empty) meaning.

TR concludes at the point when Ravi, having overcome himself and found humility and self-knowledge (the long and hard way, like all of Maniam's anti-heroes), might be conceived as being free finally to not live like a sensitive plant that withdraws into itself when touched. We know from the various examples we have seen that the change can only be a positive good for Ravi – and this, even if his gain is neither earth-shattering (to anyone but himself) nor

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[76] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, tr. Michael Hardt (*La communità che viene*, 1990; Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1993): 44.

[77] K.S. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," unpublished paper delivered in a seminar on 'Malaysian Writing: The Writers Speak' at the 26th Singapore International Festival of Books and Book Fair, 1994.

magical (in the way that symbolic rebirths are in Okri's trilogy, as illustrated by Dad's miraculous awakening to new powers on the seventh day of unconsciousness). Against this background, how do we explain the sombre note on which *TR* ends and which some critics have taken as the cipher of Ravi's final defeat as well as the just payment for having betrayed his culture? The real answer, one suspects, is simpler and closer to the joyless fact that his father had just died in a violent suicide and that he would need time to mourn before getting on with life again. Not so easy to answer in a sentence, however, are the pressing questions *TR* leaves us with, questions that are picked up again in *IFC*, Maniam's second novel, which he has described as a "'take-off' on *TR*."[78] How, for instance, might Ravi or someone like him who has returned to himself thenceforth proceed? What practical application might the logic of freedom (traced by the circular movement of Ravi's self-consciousness) have in the context of Malaysian politics and competing nationhood ideals? These are but two of the key questions we will be addressing in the next chapter.

[78] Maniam, in Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'," **249**.

7 *In A Far Country*

The Politics of Reading

MANIAM'S SECOND NOVEL, *In A Far Country* (*IFC*), is widely acknowledged as a difficult piece of writing to penetrate. Wong Soak Koon, for instance, describes it as "dense" and "obscure,"[1] while C.W. Watson is of the opinion that it is "over-ambitious" for using "too many different styles and forms, too many literary devices."[2] Furthermore, Watson writes, key moments in the novel tend to be ambiguous and disassociated from each other: "there is no overall coherence, either in terms of a consistent style or in terms of an overarching narrative structure."[3] *IFC* is not perfect, but not all flaws imputed to it are internal to the work. The problem sometimes lies with those critics who seem reluctant to engage with the text on its own terms. For instance, when Maniam weaves *TR* around a set of Indian characters, he is criticized by Tang for being predictably fixated on the Indian theme.[4] Ironically, when he uses the Indian-Malaysian community as a base upon which to talk about the marginalization of ethnic minorities in the country, he is criticized by Charles Sarvan for not engaging "more fully with the Indians in Malaysia, their history and situation."[5] On top of that, as will be elaborated later, past critics of Maniam's works tend to adhere too closely to Maniam's interpretation of *IFC*, instead of working with the writ-

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[1] Wong Soak Koon, "Journeying into K.S. Maniam's *In a Far Country*," in *Challenges of Reading the New and the Old*, ed. Lim Chee Seng (Kuala Lumpur: MACLALS, 1995): 95.

[2] C.W. Watson, "Afterword" to K.S. Maniam, *In a Far Country* (London: Skoob, 1993): 204.

[3] Watson, "Afterword," 202.

[4] Tang, "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam," 83.

[5] Charles Sarvan, "Ethnic Nationalism and Response in K.S. Maniam's *In A Far Country*," *World Literature Written in English* 35.1 (1996): 67.

erly text before them so as to tease out its rich symbolic potential. Most disturbing of all, they tend to attribute to *IFC* political issues and questions it does not raise – issues and questions which, furthermore, reflect a dangerously simplistic understanding of Malaysia's racial politics.

An exemplary case is the standard treatment of Rajan, *IFC*'s protagonist and anti-hero, who has "lost that anchorage in [...] life and only vaguely sense[s] where [he has] to turn to for a more meaningful centre" (*IFC* 121). Nowhere in the narrative is it suggested or implied that Rajan is not a Malaysian citizen of ethnic Indian background and a member of a historically dispossessed ethnic minority. Yet he is repeatedly described and treated by Wong Ming Yook as a migrant who views the world "through the lens of an essentially migrant consciousness."[6] Similarly, Malaysian ethnic minorities are misrepresented as members of "migrant communities," many of whom, Wong states without irony, "have never resolved the problem their migrant fathers/mothers encountered earlier in the [twentieth] century: estrangement and alienation from the adopted new land." To make matters worse, Wong wrongly frames "most of the current [Malaysian] writers in English" as writing from "immigrant perspectives."[7] It is strange, to say the least, that Wong, who is herself a Chinese-Malaysian, should persistently refer to the individuals and groups concerned as (im)migrants when it is crystal clear, to quote Krishnan (the protagonist in Maniam's short story "Arriving"), that

> [they] are not *pendatangs* [Malay for '(im)migrants', a derogatory term "Only politicians campaigning for votes used"]. Their great-grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Some of their grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Their fathers were not *pendatangs*. They're not *pendatangs*.[8]

It bears pointing out that what we have here is not some scholastic quibble over terminology. If *IFC* rejects "externally imposed views of group or collective identity,"[9] as Wong herself concedes, and if it seeks avenues of coming into meaningful belongingness to oneself and one's homeland in terms more embracing than 'race', then would the critic not be undermining the novel (not to mention the efforts of those seeking to repoliticize sedimen-

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[6] Wong Ming Yook, "Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English," *World Literature Written in English* 74.2 (Spring 2000): 277–82, Proquest online copy without original pagination.

[7] Wong uses the terms 'migrant' and 'immigrant' interchangeably.

[8] K.S. Maniam, *Arriving ... and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Times, 1995): 7.

[9] Wong Ming Yook, "Traversing Boundaries."

ted racial identities in Malaysia) if she allows herself to be seduced into accepting the framework of the social relationship of domination? Put another way, by framing non-Malay Malaysians as migrants when they are *not* migrants, is the critic not by implication affirming the racist logic that non-Malay Malaysians have no right to claim equal rights as Malays in the country of their birth (*not* "adoption," as Wong puts it), because their forefathers were migrants and because they themselves, as descendants of 'outsiders', can never have the same 'blood connection' to the land as Malays? In short, is the ideological battle not won when one begins to speak in the adversary's terms without being aware of it?

Paul Sharrad, in his introduction to the Skoob edition of *IFC*, also makes the same error of describing Rajan as "a second generation, upwardly mobile *migrant*."[10] His use of the term, however, seems more like an unfortunate slip than an attempt to add undue pathos to the idea of displacement, albeit a slip that does not render his analysis of the text any less problematic. Sharrad posits as his central thesis that *IFC* expresses the "paradox of being and becoming."[11] This, he says, is exemplified by Maniam, who, although a Malaysian, is compelled to write a novel "about trying to become a Malaysian." He then claims that Rajan, too, like his creator, exemplifies the same paradox:

> Most readers today, in this world of shifting populations, will recognise the general problem facing Maniam's protagonist [Rajan]. How does the individual pull up cultural roots and retain a sense of life's significance; how can one *not* divest oneself of a specific group identity in this modern age of levelling multiplicity? Moreover, how do you hold to the supports of ethnic [minority] identity while affirming nationality, especially when your nation defines itself officially in terms of another [Malay] race and culture?[12]

Sharrad's searching questions suggest that he views Rajan not as a migrant (despite having described him as one) but as an alienated Malaysian caught in a dilemma where he can neither pull up his cultural roots nor *not* pull them up without losing "a sense of life's significance [...] in this modern age of levelling multiplicity." It is also a dilemma which – if one reads Sharrad correctly – makes it impossible for Rajan to identify himself simultaneously as part of an ethnic minority and as a 'true Malaysian' because only the Malay race fits

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[10] Paul Sharrad, "Introduction" to K.S. Maniam, *In A Far Country* (London: Skoob, **1993**): xiv, emphasis added.

[11] Sharrad, "Introduction," ix.

[12] Sharrad, "Introduction," x.

the latter description. To be sure, the weighty issues Sharrad raises are not unrelated to Malaysia. As we discussed in Chapter **2**, Malaysia's present political system *is* founded upon the logic of Malay supremacy. Also, notions like culture and nationality, which Sharrad invokes are, no doubt, crucial considerations in any debate on identity-formation. The problem here is that the issues Sharrad raises are *not* the same issues directly confronting Rajan. The "general problem" facing the protagonist-narrator has nothing to do with having to decide whether he should hold on to or let go of his "cultural roots." Nor has it to do with having to shift "*from the stifling insularity of cultural boundedness*" to open-mindedness, as Wong claims.[13] The text makes it amply clear that Rajan need not unbind himself from his culture, simply because he has never been bound to it in the first place. Rajan is a non-conformist, always wary of being trapped by the past. He is the exact opposite of Santhi, his wife, who needs to periodically "re-immerse herself in the [Hindu-Indian] life and values from which she had come" (*IFC* **102**) in order to feel 'at home' within herself. For not holding fast to the belief that absolute fidelity to one's culture is a form of heroism, Rajan even earns himself, in a dream sequence, harsh rebuke from a faceless crowd of Indians referred to by his friend, Ramasamy, as "our kind of people":

> When I am sitting in some Indian restaurant, they crowd round me with leering faces and say, "What are you eating? Rice and curry? Where does the taste come from? From women whose Indian arms sweated to grind the spices." They get nasty [...]
>
> When I go to a friend's funeral, they heat broad drums over the fire, swill toddy and chant at me: "Who will beat the drums for you when you die? Who will sing your praises? Who will tell the world the story of your life? Which wife will beat her breasts for you?" (*IFC* **155–56**)

Much like Ravi in *TR*, Rajan in *IFC* demonstrates no interest in practising the rites and rituals of the culture into which he was born and to which he has never shown passionate attachment. He is, in fact, even more disinclined to do so by the novel's conclusion. After returning from a perspective-altering journey to the north of the country, he openly objects for the first time to his wife's wish to organize a *puja* (Hindu ritual) to celebrate his homecoming. Forthrightly, Rajan tells Santhi not to "waste time or money on any ceremony" (*IFC* **172**). The wife insists, arguing that it is necessary for her and the children. Rajan gives in and goes through the ceremony for her sake, but with indifference:

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[13] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries," emphasis added.

> "You've to fast for a day," Santhi told me after being in consultation with the priest [who "looked an incongruous figure not because he was archaic in a modern setting but because he pretended to know so much and wield so much power over the women"].
>
> "I don't have to do anything," I said, not quite angry. "Do anything you want but leave me out of it."
>
> "But you're the most important person in this ceremony," she protested.
>
> "You make me important," I said. (*IFC* **172**)

So, if Rajan has always already decided where precisely he stands in relation to his wife's Hindu-Indian Thing, what, then, is the nature of his life-crisis? How is it related to the logic of freedom we traced earlier in our analysis of *TR*, and to Maniam's description of *IFC* as a novel "which deals with all three races" and in which "things are reenacted"?[14] Our analysis of *IFC*, which will be guided by these key questions, will commence in the next section and take us to the conclusion of this chapter.

Father and Son

IFC opens with Rajan brooding in solitude, darkly admitting that he has now, in his middle-age, lost his moorings in life. Where there was once an aggressive ambition to make his mark on the world and influence the times, and where there were the supreme self-confidence and drive which took him out of the rubber plantation and put him in his "present status of house and property owner, with a solid bank account" (*IFC* **3**), there is now only a "terrifying emptiness" (**25**), a "zero in [his] mind" (**1**). It is as if the soft, deep gnawing of his conscience, which he has had for the longest time, were only now exerting its full force.

Rajan's loss of self-certainty and contraction into himself are, strangely, something that 'just occurs', an unplanned event triggered by something as commonplace as a blade of light that catches his eyes one evening, not a consciously willed, intellectual withdrawal from the world, as Wong assumes.[15] Abstracted from the empirical world he shares with his wife and children, Rajan finds his thoughts constantly returning on their own accord to "events and people [he] had thought hardly worth paying attention to" (*IFC* **3**). Like a "helpless witness" (**25**), his mind turns to his late father, a migrant who came to Malaya on a ship filled with human dung, hoping to find "heaven" but

[14] Maniam, in Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'," **249**.

[15] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries."

finding instead "insect-gnawing ravines" (**7**) and no escape save through cheap alcohol. "Wife and children. Just cycle after cycle. Can't break the turning of the wheel. I tried" (**7**), his despairing father lamented in a toddy-soaked moment of indiscretion. Rajan also recalls his father's dying days, how his "puffy cheeks and premature grey hair traced the history of cynicism" (**42**), how he "dreamed too much and achieved too little" (**46**), and how this "showed in the disproportion he carried about with him: this distended belly and the rarely used, thin limbs" (**46**). Most horrifying of all, he remembers his father coughing up blood and dying with "his eyes closed to the world in which he had found no home" (**22**). Considering Rajan's traumatic childhood, it is no surprise that he should want to flee from the ill fate that broke his father's spirit, and to possess the kind of independence and socio-economic security in life that only the well-off can afford. He works hard and succeeds in making a somebody out of himself. Yet despite this, he is unable to sever the umbilical cord which links him to his unlucky father: "Though I scoffed at him, how strange it is now to almost look and be like him" (**3**).

Already here we can see the eternal return making its comeback. "Is it possible for despair to be inherited through the blood? [...] Can memories be inherited?" (*IFC* **3–4**), muses Rajan. "Can repetition make actual the past?" (**4**), or, to put it in context, by involuntarily returning to the past over and over again to refind himself and exorcize the blankness that has come into his mind (just as his late father kept retelling the same stories to young Rajan as an unconscious means of 'forgetting' the one immutable constant in his life: suffering), might Rajan unwittingly confer upon the past the reality it never had, thus ending up even more lost to himself? *IFC* provides no direct answer, although it is possible that, by placing a question-mark over the reliability of Rajan's memory and, by implication, his reliability as narrator of his retrospective self-account, the text is cueing the reader to appraise the 'facts' with the critical eye of a doubting Thomas and to look out for inconsistencies in Rajan's reconstruction of the past, for moments when certainty falters or words fail. The text, it should be noted, is punctuated by several such moments: "Is this a trick of the mind or a fact?" (**136**); "Actually, I don't know what I mean" (**132**); "I may be wrong, of course [...] But from where I stand, as one who has survived the chaos of the mind, I feel doubt is necessary before clarity can be grasped" (**144**).

Just as Ravi's memory is bracketed, so, too, is the consistency of the central characters in the novel, all of whom are, as is easily overlooked, never what they appear at first glance. Take Rajan's Tamil-speaking father, who, according to Wong, represents "the obvious, Rajan's [Hindu-Indian] cultural

heritage."[16] Although Wong neither elaborates nor illustrates "the obvious," it is not difficult to see what she is aiming at. True, Rajan's father used to carry the pubescent Rajan away with the story about his mythical ancestors, early voyagers from India who braved jungles and seas to build a fabulous ancient kingdom (a "little India just here") in pre-Islamic Malaysia (*IFC* **6**).[17] It is also true that Rajan's father openly regretted how the same voyagers allegedly lost the opportunity "to lead and to rule" the land because, being "not right in the head," they chose to go "again on their unquenchable travels" instead of remaining in the land where they had built their temples. Based on what we have just seen, one might be persuaded to agree with Wong that Rajan's embittered father represents his "cultural heritage" after all.[18] The question is: if the father truly incarnates Indianness ('what being an Indian is all about'), would he have troubled to bemoan the fragmentation of Malaysia along racial lines even before the advent of independence? To quote the words Rajan remembers his father using: "People [came] together like brothers from the same family. Not strangers from different countries. Look where we are now. Shadows in the darkness, not even hearing the other person breathe. Not even caring" (*IFC* **6**). As for the father's apparent longing for India, might it not be viewed as a false longing for something he never possessed in the first place? Recall that Rajan's father left India to escape suffering, not because it was "a motherland flowing with milk and honey" (**105**). India, whose harsh poverty migrants had cursed before they left, only grew "into the tree of plenty" in their "hunger-filled dreams" when the land to which they had migrated offered them no "work to earn the money for their food" (**105**).

There are unmistakable similarities between Rajan's father and Periathai, Ravi's grandmother in *TR*. Both are first-generation working-class migrants and traditionalists in comparison to Rajan and Ravi. But unlike Periathai, who bears her lot stoically until the final days of her life, Rajan's father is a highly inconsistent character whose neurotic attitude towards the same object of contemplation shifts constantly, often from pole to pole. The India in his mind is simultaneously a "dry, gossip-diseased [...] land" of suffering (*IFC* **7**) and a blessed land from which sprung artisans of exquisite temples and temple bells whose pure music could hold "together the whole world" (**6**). In the same way, the stars are cursed for pulling him to Malaya like a blind bat to fruit

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[16] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries."

[17] Little India is possibly an allusion to the lost Hindu–Buddhist civilisation known as *Gangga Negara* ('A City on the Ganges' in Sanskrit), the ruins of which have been found in Perak, a northern Malaysian state.

[18] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries."

trees, adulated for the shine of their benevolent light, which led the bold ancient voyagers to the land now called Malaysia, and cursed for leading the same voyagers away from the magnificent "little India," away from the India they had built for themselves.

In contrast to Periathai, who derives enjoyment from subordinating herself to the Hindu-Indian Thing she had brought with her from India, Rajan's father in *IFC* used to dream, prior to his spirit's defeat, of going beyond the familiar rubber plantation. Recall, as we saw in Chapter 2, that rubber plantations in those days were a death-trap yawning to engulf the surplus population of India. It was a place of "much suffering and futility," in which the majority of Indian labourers tragically chose to remain because they saw the unknown beyond "as some territory of even greater pain" (*IFC* 44). Finally and most significant of all, although the two characters go to their graves in a state of unredeemable brokenness, there is nothing in *IFC* to suggest that Rajan's father plunges towards death for the same Thing that Periathai volitionally elevates from constative to imperative. His is ultimately the curse of having been born poor and insignificant – a bitter curse he shares with other Indian migrants living under the same treacherous conditions, all shuffled and manipulated through life by forces over which they have no mastery: "The source was external, a national crisis or words radiating from the white administrators" (43). It is also the selfsame curse young Rajan, propelled by the "desire to be the master of [his] own destiny" (68), must cancel out of existence if he is not to be visited by it.

Attitudes of Thought

In contrast to *TR*, *IFC* does not follow the first steps of the protagonist's transition from working-class poverty to white-collarship. The entire period is summarized in a few lines before the narrative zooms in on Rajan in his young adult years working in an isolated interior north of the country. There he stays until shortly after the death of his colleague, Lee Shin, by which time he has gained "financial security and more, a nest-egg with which to strike out on [his] own" (*IFC* 66). Rajan subsequently relocates to a larger town, sets up his own business in land development, and comes to the premature conclusion that he has "finally freed" himself from the force which "killed [his] father and his generation." Thereafter the narrative takes a sudden political turn.

The scene marking this first foregrounding of the political turns on the controversial demolition of old colonial buildings. Not long after Rajan moves to the new town, the local council decrees that these old buildings, including the District Office and the Court House, "so full of history and culture" (*IFC*

69), are to be destroyed to make way for new post-independence development projects. The people's reaction to the announcement is surprisingly spirited: "The whole town seethed with talk and there were many camps, attitudes and opinions" (**69**). Rajan is reluctantly drawn into the fray by his friends Ramasamy (an Indian bookshop proprietor whose "smiling, ageless" face shines "with a kind of velvety assurance") and Jimmy Kok (a "nebulous" Chinese man who inherited his rubber-dealer business from his father). Despite their heated arguments, the three men agree in principle that the best way to turn the demolition issue from a "simple town affair" into a "national concern" is to do it through the newspapers. To kick-start the debate, they plan to write letters to the press containing several contrasting viewpoints. But "when the letters went out to the papers, it became clear that they were not playing a game of strategy" (**72**). Rajan, in his retrospective account of the episode, is brow-raisingly contemptuous of the published letters, particularly Ramasamy's and Jimmy's, which became "the voice of the public" (*IFC* **74**). According to Rajan, Ramasamy's letter betrayed "pretensions to progressive thinking" (**73**), while Jimmy's "contradicted the way he presented himself to the world," presenting him not as the uncertain, searching man he seems but as someone whose letter betrays what he secretly believed in (**74**). In Rajan's summation, both letters displayed "much self-congratulation and mutual admiration but hardly any original thought." Instead of taking Rajan's word for it, it would be prudent to look at what Ramasamy and Jimmy actually write to the press. The following are extracts of their letters, followed by Rajan's:

> *A man's life is not his life; a country's progress is not its own progress. The events that time brings [shape] the destinies of both. And time flows like the river, moves like the sea. It can push against the banks and pull them down; it can wash against the shore and take away the land. But both the river and the sea can also [...] leave us with more. These buildings the Council wants to pull down are the more that has been given to us. These structures that the British have left behind do not belong to them alone. They do not only reveal their domination and culture. They reveal us too. They reveal us as shaped by forces that have worked within the larger force – time.* (Ramasamy, *IFC* **73–74**)

> *We are not against progress in this country or have become members of that invisible group that 'obstructs the sense of belonging to the country.' We merely question the wisdom behind the words 'sense of belonging to the country.' [...] This expression has been used to cover, ironically, almost everything from eating habits to the games that ought to be played in this country. I assert that everything that has happened in this country belongs to us [...] These buildings are re-*

> *cords and reminders of the systems that have come down to us. In destroying them, we are destroying our past and, more importantly, our future*. (Jimmy, *IFC* **74**)
>
> The underlying reason, and the main one, why people are so opposed to the demolition [...] is simple: they cannot bear to see what has given them a sense of security be brought to rubble in a few hours. The destruction of the familiar is a destruction of the comfortable. If we look deeply into the phenomenon, we will discover the imperative for why these buildings will have to go [...] What do they tell us about the spirit of the people [i.e. the colonialists] who built them?
>
> They leapt across the sea of the unknown to discover new territories for themselves. They left behind themselves the safe and the domestic to carve out a new land for themselves. There was no continuity, past or future. Once they got here, they looked into the resources available and built a familiar environment around themselves. They transplanted their language, culture, systems of order, justice and administration.
>
> That is what we have to do: make a great leap. Now that we have the land we have to build the systems that will support our hopes and ambitions. We must not allow ourselves to be trapped by the past, by the familiar. We must go forward into the great unknown. (Ravi, *IFC* **76**)

Few who read Rajan's letter would disagree that it takes great courage to let go of the comfortingly familiar and make that dangerous leap into the unknown. We have seen this exemplified positively in *TR* by Ravi, who 'finds himself' only after he 'loses himself.' But Rajan errs in his overconfident belief that the way forward is to cut oneself off entirely from the past, as though that were possible. Also, he is too hasty in summarily dismissing Ramasamy's and Jimmy's overlapping views, which are hardly without merit. This holds true irrespective of whether Ramasamy and Jimmy mean what they say or are merely pretending to be progressive thinkers, as Rajan claims. (In Lacan, truth resides not in what one means to say but in what *is* said.) Jimmy is quite right to ask: must every sign of otherness (the ugly past, the colonial culprit and so forth) be expunged from sight and memory before the country and its people may be said to be progressing? Are those who question the practice of narrow nationalism really obstructing "the sense of belonging to the country" (*IFC* **74**)? Similarly, and notwithstanding his use of well-worn metaphors, Ramasamy is hardly unreasonable in arguing that colonial structures do not unmediatedly signify the Other's "domination and culture" (**74**). If the structures are perceived as purely and necessarily representing 'the one who did this to me', then might it not be due to the perceiver's unwilling-

ness to see that the Other, who is supposed to want to 'do me in', is in truth the very precondition of my self-identity – "without it, I would lose the big Culprit, the point by reference to which my subjective position acquires its consistency"?[19]

From the letters, it is clear that Rajan's view is directly counterposed to Ramasamy's and Jimmy's overlapping views. While Ramasamy and Jimmy acknowledge the limitation and dependency of each identity on the other, Rajan assumes that the Other is irreducibly Other (that is, as radically exterior to himself) and takes himself to be a motionless tautology of 'I = I'. In this precise sense, Rajan's attitude of thought or mode of action and belief may be said to be similar to Ravi's in the early stages of his life as Beautiful Soul. As we saw, Beautiful Soul is a self-centric attitude of thought that refuses to decipher, in the disorder of the world, the truth of its own subjective position. It is close to what Maniam describes as the "mightier-fightier-than-thou" attitude of closing oneself off from "wider horizons and bigger worlds."[20] We saw this exemplified in Chapter **6** by Ravi, who only realizes 'after the fact' that he, too, had been as guilty of subordinating himself to his particular Thing as his 'stupid' father and grandmother were to theirs. By the same logic, Rajan in *IFC* wrongly perceives himself to be a neutral observer of a world whose regressive ways he denounces as vigorously as he protests his innocence. In addition, he is possessed by the need to be proven right, that individuals like Ramasamy and Jimmy are working against him and the discovery of "a common ground for identity" (*IFC* **73**) even though they are working *towards* it, as their letters attest. By overlooking the invertedness of his world, Rajan ends up contributing to the preservation of the unfortunate conditions he bemoans. This is implied by Rajan, who says in retrospect that his letter to the press had indirectly strengthened the Town Council's case for the demolition of the colonial buildings. This, in turn, paved the way for the actual razing of the buildings – "planned modernization of the town," in official terms, but something shadier in reality:

> Some of the Town Council members sought me out and congratulated me. They looked on me as a valuable source of sympathy and support for the planned modernization of the town. However, I still detected an aloofness in them that told me they had more up their sleeves than I could ever know. (*IFC* **77**)

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[19] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London & New York: Verso, **1991**): **71**.

[20] Maniam, in Wilson, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," **23**.

Beautiful Soul is one of three forms of consciousness the subject can adopt in relation to the Thing around which his desire turns. As with the other two forms, which we will examine subsequently, it is not merely an insular attitude one assumes in one's own private world. The person I cannot *not* be, my relationship with the interior of my being, the symbolic universe I inhabit, the radical Other thwarting the realization of 'who I really am', the obstacles in my path to the lost (Nation-)Thing that makes me unique – all this exist in the same space as the one in which political parties intervene and in which elections are fought. As *IFC*'s demolition-scene shows, the line between public and private is "an unstable frontier constantly trespassed, with personal autonomy investing public aims and the private becoming politicized."[21]

Here we need to emphasize that Beautiful Soul is not a racial positioning but an attitude of thought. To render this palpable, let us consider Maniam's portrayal of the melancholic Lee Shin, a Beautiful Soul whom Wong mistakes for "the Chinese […] consciousness."[22] No doubt, Lee Shin is marked in *IFC* as an ethnic Chinese and a Sinophile who is "so self-contained that nothing seem[s] to touch him" (*IFC* **34**). He obsessively collects things Chinese – "furniture, crockery, [intricate bamboo] flute, banners, calligraphy and decorated dragons" – as if he is "trying to convert a country foreign by creating cultural landscape and landmarks in which he could be at home" (**162**). On top of that, Rajan says, "his preference for the so-called virtuous life could disgust anyone" (**54**). These are indeed unflattering descriptions but do they make Lee Shin representative of the Chinese consciousness? What is the Chinese consciousness, anyway? Is it a natural property essential to all 'real Chinese'? Can a Chinese opt not to have it? Can a non-Chinese possess it? And what about Rajan, Ravi, Periathai and other Beautiful Souls in Maniam's writings? Do these Indian figures not share with Lee Shin the *same* self-denying attitude of thought towards their respective Things? Wong's thesis that Lee Shin personifies the Chinese consciousness is faulty – not because the Chinese in Malaysia are 'not really like that' but because her notion of the Chinese being inherently insular and sinocentric ultimately has nothing to do with the Chinese. The fascinating 'conceptual Chinese' painted by Wong only functions as a way of stitching up the inconsistency of our own ideological system, the evocation of which falsely "*explains everything*: all of a sudden

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[21] Chantal Mouffe, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Critchley, Derrida, Laclau, Rorty*, ed. Mouffe (London & New York: Routledge, **1996**): **3**.

[22] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries."

'things become clear', perplexity is replaced by a firm sense of orientation."[23] The operation here is homologous to the way in which the "Jewish plot" allows antisemites to "unify in a single large narrative the experiences of economic crisis, 'moral decadence' and loss of values, political frustration and 'national humiliation', and so on."[24] It "*blocks* any further inquiry into the social meaning (social mediation) of those phenomena that arouse fear in the common man."[25]

Law of the Heart

For the same reasons, it is erroneous of Wong to represent Zulkifli (or Zul, the Malay villager in *IFC*) as *the* Malay consciousness and then to equate Malay consciousness simplistically with authentic oneness with the land and the antithesis of "migrant" consciousness.[26] Of course, Zul is identified in the novel as an ethnic Malay and, wryly, as representative of "the oldest inhabitant of the country" (*IFC* **162**). He is not dissimilar to Pak Mat, a character in S. Othman Kelantan's novel *Perjudian* ('Gambling'), who declares, "I am a real peasant. My land is mine for the whole of my life."[27] *IFC* also makes it apparent that Zul believes in his heart that only Malays like himself "really understand this country" and outsiders like Rajan can "only dishonour the land" (**92**). All that is spelled out from the outset, when Zulkifli tries to get Rajan to discover the spirit of the land "as my people did" so that he (Rajan) would "know what this country is" (**93**) really about:

> "You seem to know everything about it [the land/country]," [Rajan says].
> "Through the instinct that has travelled to me through the blood of my ancestors," [Zul] says.
> "Are you saying I can't have such an instinct?"
> "You don't have ancestors here," he says. (*IFC* **100–101**)

The binary oppositions set up in the text are hard to miss: Zulkifli against Rajan, Malay against non-Malay, 'son of the soil' against 'outsider'. The

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[23] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, **18**.

[24] *For They Know Not What They Do*, **18**.

[25] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, **149**.

[26] Wong, "Traversing Boundaries."

[27] S. Othman Kelantan, *Perjudian* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, **1973**): **146**. Tr. from Malay by Virginia Matheson Hooker, *Writing a New Society* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, **2000**): **327**.

question is: does *IFC* endorse what it sets up as necessary, ideal or inevitable? Does it affirm the racist logic of eternal Malay supremacy which allows Zul to claim preeminence over Rajan? Or does it contest the said logic and offer up an alternative and a more inclusive re-imagining of the nation? My contention is that *IFC* takes the latter path – not because it wants to demonstrate that Zul embodies the Malay consciousness (as Wong claims) and consequently that all Malays are as self-conceited as Zul. It would be illogical to formulate Zul in this way, as the conceitedness he exemplifies and which in turn overdetermines his character is not a racial feature but an attitude of thought which anyone can assume.

Conceitedness is not the preserve of any one race, but it is descriptive of Malays, including those in the political and literary circles, whose defining "psychocultural trait [...] is the assumed superiority and legitimacy of their culture, society, and institutions."[28] Analysing the works of modern Malay writers like Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Shahnon Ahmad, Muhammad Dahlan (Arena Wati) and Abdullah Sidek, Tham Seong Chee in his incisive essays argues that even though the Malay literary intelligentsia speak out strongly against what they see as immorality, inhumanity, hypocrisy and irreligiousness, and for the need to revolutionize Malay thinking, they never question "the spirit of the *adat*, namely the traditional behavioural precepts that underlie correct behaviour as conceived by Malays."[29] The validity and appropriateness of the Malay social system – both as a framework of social and economic modernization and as a source of values – is accepted as simply given, permanent and unchanging. This curious predilection of Malay-centric Malays not to question the foundation of their being has its roots in the old Malay system. Malay classical and semi-historical works like the seventeenth-century *Sejarah Melayu* ('Malay Annals') and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* ('Story of Hang Tuah') reveal that the system, enmeshed with Islam and centred on the institution of the sultanate, upheld unquestioning loyalty as a virtue. It forbade the challenging of authority and taught commoners to believe that breaking with the *adat* was as unthinkable as trampling on the heads of one's parents. In this autocratic world, oral literature – proverbs and maxims, customary sayings, riddles and puns, animal stories, legends, folk tales, and the *pantun* (a quatrain sung or spoken with social intentions) – functioned not as today's 'sacred'

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[28] Tham Seong Chee, "Literary Response and the Social Process: An Analysis of Cultural and Political Beliefs among Malay Writers," in *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore UP, 1981): 272.

[29] Tham, "Literary Response and the Social Process," 255.

repository of culture but as an ideological apparatus for maintaining the established feudal order. It "validated traditional social norms and emphasized the correctness of the *adat* or customary practices."[30]

Modern Malay literature is not dissimilar to the premodern in spirit. It is neotraditional insofar as it habitually rationalizes the infallibility of the Malay way of life, the legitimacy of Malay hegemony and the superiority of Islam as solution to the Malay community's inner conflicts. Islam, says Shahnon Ahmad, "guarantees the right path that is valid for guiding oneself, [the] family, community and country."[31] It is "the true sign from God," unlike "the irrational, non-scientific and fairy-tale ideas like the values before the arrival of Islam." Even before the heydays of 'ASAS 50',[32] it has been the norm for the majority of Malay writers to show in their works the ways in which Malay ways are superior to others. Malay *kampung* ('rural-traditional') life – its values, institutions, problems and personalities – is framed as the objective and permanent reality. *Kampung* folks are depicted as poor and in need of development and improvement in "their way of thinking to a way that makes them feel the necessity to defend their own kind when threatened with the strength of another."[33] They are not paranoid, just good simple folks striving to make an honest living and to submit to Almighty Allah.

Considering the above, it is no surprise that the characteristic impression readers get from reading Malay literature is the "kindness, magnanimity, and understanding of the Malays, partly a manifestation of the traditional Malay moral code (*budi*) and more accurately a manifestation of perceived cultural and political superiority."[34] In Ibrahim Omar's novel *Desa Pingitan* ('Secluded Village'), a Chinese family survives the Japanese occupation only because Malays were kind enough to offer them shelter. In Abdullah Hussain's *Interlok* ('Interlogue'), the reconstitution of Ching Huat's family after the Malaysian Emergency "is attributed in no small part to the actions and understanding, indeed the forgiveness, of Lazim who symbolizes the exploited

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[30] Tham, "Literary Response and the Social Process," 254.

[31] Shahnon Ahmad in his acceptance speech after receiving the 1982 National Literary Award, in Solehah Ishak, *Malaysian Literary Laureates* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998): 83.

[32] ASAS 50 or Angkatan Sasterawan 50 ('the Generation 50 Writers') was founded in the 1950s. It consisted of radical Malay nationalists-writers whose avowed concerns were to awaken and defend the Malay race through literature.

[33] Solehah Ishak, *Malaysian Literary Laureates*, 76.

[34] Tham, "Literary Response and the Social Process," 273.

Malay in the hand of the Chinese businessman."[35] Less subtly, Shahnon Ahmad, in his novel *Menteri* ('Minister'), implies that the non-Malays are in Malaysia on sufferance of the Malays.[36] Tham's study provides many more similar illustrations, but the pattern is consistent:

> The [Malay] literary elites accept the foregoing framework of ideas and thus look at communal problems and issues from the vantage point of their community. Their claim to be committed writers, as men with a mission to shape ideas and mould beliefs, is therefore communally oriented. They are the literary intelligentsia [...] concerned with the evaluation, examination, formulation, and transmission of thoughts and ideas, but they are not in Mannheim's conceptualization 'free intelligentsia'.[37]

The writers' inability to break free of their libidinal fixation on the Malay race is due in no small part to the intellectual climate created by the premodern and modern-day Malay political class. Certainly, the Malay literati and Malay politicians do not always see eye-to-eye. The former can be, and have been, highly critical of the political class – the latter described in *Perjudian* as "able to feed from other people's corpses,"[38] and as pieces of excreta in Shahnon Ahmad's novel *Shit @ Pukimak @ PM*.[39] In spite of their differences, however, players from both fields share the same compulsive obsession with the Malay race and the "ideology of 'rights' for Malays who in the pre-modern era had none."[40] (As we have seen, premodern ordinary Malay never had rights before their ruler, just as Rajan's father never tasted the nectar of India he purports to have lost.) Even before official links between literature and politics were established in **1958** with the launch of the first Malay novel-writing competition, agents from both sides have directly or indirectly worked

[35] Tham, "Literary Response and the Social Process," **273**.

[36] Shahnon Ahmad, *Menteri* (Alor Setar: Pustaka Sekolah: **1967**): **44**.

[37] Tham, "The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia," in *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seong Chee (Singapore: Singapore UP, **1981**): **227**. Karl Mannheim, a student of Georg Lukács, defined the socially unattached or free(-floating) intelligentsia as agents unbound in loyalty to any particular group and who are open-minded enough to examine and critique their own social moorings.

[38] S. Othman Kelantan, *Perjudian*, **77**; tr. in Hooker, *Writing a New Society*, **333**.

[39] See Shahnon Ahmad, *Shit @ Pukimak @ PM* (Kubang Kerian: Pustaka Reka, **1999**).

[40] Hooker, *Writing a New Society*, **360**.

together to ensure the flourishing of Malay-centric literature. In 1958, budding writers were urged to use their talents to sustain and valorize the Malay race. They were, and still are, provided with sustained patronage by the UMNO-dominated Malaysian government, which sees them as the hope for bringing the race "to an era which is glorious in good books."[41] More than four decades later, they are still trained to do the same.

"Malay literature has not come of age," admits A. Samad Ismail, a veteran journalist and an early member of 'ASAS 50'.[42] "It seems to be operating within its own community. It is too sheltered and there is no free development." This is exemplified, for instance, by the 1995 'New Malay Novel' Competition which called for Malay writers to produce works containing great concepts for the race, religion, and nation. Writers should discuss *Melayu Baru* ('New Malays') who "revere their past history and civilisation" and possess a "resolute spirit in facing the twenty-first-century in the new industrialized Malay nation."[43] The winner of the competition was Saloma Mat Lajis. Although a product of the late twentieth century, Saloma's novel *Pelangi Tengah Hari* ('Midday Rainbow') "displays many points of continuity with the narratives of the early part of the century. The Malay race remains at its heart." The same phenomenon is observable in Malay academia, as reflected in Hashim Awang's essay "An Independent Literary Theory: Malay Methodology," in which he argues that the characteristics of Malay literature require the creation of a special Malay literary theory based on Islamic belief and Malay culture which not only distinguishes itself from Western theories but also affirms "the specialness of the Malays as one of the major peoples of the world,"[44] "an important people able to create premier literary works."[45]

The narcissistic racial attitude of thought we have just described has a special name in Hegelian philosophy; it is called "Law of the Heart." Like Beautiful Soul, Law of the Heart treasures its being-for-self and "seeks its pleasure in displaying the excellence of its own nature, and in promoting the welfare of mankind."[46] Unlike Beautiful Soul, however, the Heart actually seeks to impose as universal ordinance its inner Law, which it mistakes for the necessary

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[41] Ibrahim Omar, *Desa Pingitan* (1964; Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2001): 548; translated in Virginia Matheson Hooker, *Writing a New Society*, 260–61.

[42] *Sun Magazine* (Kuala Lumpur; 15 August 1996), 3.

[43] Hooker, *Writing a New Society*, 351.

[44] Hashim Awang, "An Independent Literary Theory: Malay Methodology," tr. Lynne Kathryn Norazit, *Malay Literature* 15.1 (2002): 28.

[45] Hashim Awang, "An Independent Literary Theory," 29.

[46] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 222.

Law of Everybody, as Law of the Land.[47] Or, in the words of Robert Solomon, it "tries to elevate this heart-felt sentimentality to the level of ethics, to an articulate philosophy which applies to anyone other than oneself."[48] To that end, the Heart devotes its energy, with the earnestness of a higher purpose, as exemplified by Malay loyalists in Malaysia and Zul in *IFC*.

Malay loyalists are not only unable to break the moorings of their native self, they also want ethnic minorities in Malaysia to 'acculturate' to the 'host' (Malay) culture. According to Mohd. Taib Osman, ethnic minorities should use the Malay language, dress in an "almost similar" fashion to Malays, demonstrate visible similarities with Malays and acculturate Malay habits and customs into their "transplanted culture."[49] Similarly, in Maniam's *IFC*, Zul is not only unable to 'get over' the Tiger *qua* primordial Law of his Heart, he also wants Rajan to submit to it. He wants Rajan to "moult," to free himself completely of "the burden of being responsible for [him]self" by yielding to the "more encompassing and powerful" (*IFC* 142) Tiger that is the Malay-Thing. The Malay-Thing is the Law of Zul's Heart, the presupposed Guarantor of Zul's ontological consistency and claim to pre-eminence over Rajan. It is the Thing posited as holding together the Malay race as uniquely distinct from other races, something accessible only to Malays, something 'they', the Others, can neither partake in nor grasp. The Malay-Thing is represented by the Tiger, a feared animal that is "more than an animal" (100), "the oldest symbol of our [Malay] civilization" (129), an integral symbol on Malaysia's national coat-of-arms, and a cultural symbol of superstitious significance in the Malay community:[50]

> "You must see the tiger."
> "What tiger?" I [Rajan] said.
> "Are you afraid?"
> "You want me to go tiger hunting?" I said. (*IFC* 92)
>
> "We've to go on a trip to tigerland," he said.
> "Tigerland?"

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[47] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 267.

[48] Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983): 507.

[49] Mohd. Taib Osman, *Kebudayaan Melayu dalam beberapa Persoalan*, 133.

[50] A Malay belief has it that shamans, practitioners of *pancak silat* (a Malay martial art) and ordinary mortals with supernatural knowledge have the power to transform themselves into a tiger or be possessed by its spirit.

> "Don't you know that the tiger lived in this country long before we came?" he said. "We must look at the country through its eyes."
> "Have you done this yourself?"
> "No, my forefathers went through that experience," he said. "I want to experience what they saw. You must come with me. Then, maybe you'll believe. (*IFC* **93**)
>
> "We must see through its eyes. Feel through its body. We must become the tiger." (Zul, *IFC* **100**)

To Rajan, Zul professes belief in the goodness of "free[ing] ourselves from thoughts given to us by the past. Otherwise we can't move forward" (*IFC* **96**). Yet in reality Zul – like the aforementioned Malay intelligentsia who saw themselves as ostensible agents of change – enjoys nothing more than to hark back to the past, to recapture the Tiger-Thing by surrendering his personal responsibility to it. In addition, Zul also desires Rajan to desire his desire to become one with the Tiger. So strong is his desire that he coerces the latter into accompanying him on a journey into Tigerland. From the outset and for almost the entire journey, which Maniam narrates in 'magical-realist' mode, Zul takes charge, self-assuredly leading Rajan through crossings into the interior of the jungle, beyond a certain mythical tree stump that marks "the door to the tiger's world" (**95**). Along the way they undergo surreal transformations: strangely open to each other, "overcome by something beyond us" (**97**), then locked in a battle of wills over the appropriate way of approaching the Tiger. On the first night, Zul keeps up a long conversation with Rajan about his past, in a voice "rich with the memory of his ancestors" (**94**). The next morning his face takes on a haunted look, "filled as he was with the necessity to discover a way through to his ancestral memory" (**95**). The closer they get to the Tiger, the more deeply possessed Zul becomes.

Rajan, by contrast, takes the headstrong approach. When Zul confides that the Tiger is watching them, he boldly suggests that they outwatch it. To Zul's prescription "We've to leave everything behind [...] We've to be nothing to know the unknowable," Rajan asks himself: "Why do I have to submit to his fantastical talk?" (*IFC* **100**). Asked to "take on the character of the tiger" in order to come into its presence, he informs Zul that he would rather kill the beast by surprising it. Zul insists: "You must surrender your self to be the other self" (**101**), until Rajan's curiosity finally dissipates, causing him to recoil from Zul's "desire to reveal his private vision to [him]" (**94**). Zul, however, is not to be resisted. He goes into a ritual on Rajan's behalf, against his will. As Rajan recounts,

> All I remember of it is the incessant chanting that came from his lips. Though the words poured from him, I only remember their sound [...]

> it even affected my sight. The jungle became, suddenly, a seething mass of colours that glowed as if in a subterranean landscape. They fell all over my body in bands that were at first warm but later became almost intolerably hot. They didn't actually burn my skin but I could feel it peeling and leaving me in a vulnerable nakedness. Was that when I turned and ran? Or much, much later when my personality threatened to dissolve into nothingness? All the time the chant poured from Zulkifli's throat like an ageless invitation to disown whatever I was and to merge with the Tiger. I didn't wait for that to happen. (*IFC* **101**)

The excursion ends with neither Zul nor Rajan sighting the Tiger they had gone into the jungle to 'hunt' – but what is the failure symbolic of? What is it that Rajan hopes to attain by reaching out to the elusive Tiger *qua* Malay-Thing? And why is he unwilling and unable "to go the whole road" (**132**) and merge with it? To shed light on the symbolism of Rajan's journey into the heart of Tigerland, it would be helpful if we take a detour through "Haunting the Tiger" (*HTT*), a short story by Maniam which is really *IFC*'s jungle scene given a few changes and a different ending.[51]

Haunting the Tiger

As in *IFC*, *HTT* presents Zul as desiring the Indian protagonist, Muthu (as Rajan's precursor), to admire his Malay-Thing and capitulate to the embodiment of what is "deep inside" him (*HTT* **42**) – the Tiger. Zul wants to show Muthu that "he was somebody" (**43**). Muthu in turn follows Zul into the jungle, hoping that sighting the Tiger will somehow enable him to "become somebody" (**43**). In *HTT* more than *IFC*, however, Zul's self-conceit and over-confidence in his being of the land is conveyed much more strongly. For example, when queried by Muthu if he too possesses the Thing he says his ancestors possessed, Zul claims with false humility that it is "Deep inside [himself]. No need to show it so loudly to the world [...] Centuries of living here" (*HTT* **42**). Also significantly amplified in *HTT* is the Indian protagonist's alienness in Zul's eyes, as illustrated by the following scene that did not make its way into *IFC*:

> "I know what's wrong," Zulkifli says. "There's something foreign to the tiger's nose. He won't show himself until the smells are gone."

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[51] *HTT* came out in **1990**, by which time Maniam had already completed the first draft of *IFC*. The latter was first published in **1993**.

> Zulkifli fixes Muthu with a surveying stare. Muthu becomes nervous.
> "What smells?" he says.
> "Mind and body smells," Zulkifli says.
> Muthu is offended and turns away from him.
> "Not in the way you can't go near a person," Zulkifli says confronting Muthu. "The clothes you wear, the thoughts you think. Where do they come from?"
> "They're just clothes and ideas," Muthu says.
> "They must fit into the place where the tiger lives."
> "Why must they fit in?" Muthu says. (*HTT* 45)

The most notable point of contrast between the two works is the conclusion. In *IFC*, Rajan gets a second chance to 'confront' the Tiger, as will be elaborated later. *HTT*'s Muthu, on the other hand, ends up a broken old man lying pathetically on his deathbed – sick and dying but unable to find peace in death because death will not come easily to him. Haunted by the Tiger he never sighted, all Muthu can do is to ramble on deliriously about how he now regrets having compromised his life and the lives of those close to him. Like Rajan towards the close of *IFC*, Muthu realizes that he has wronged his wife from the day they married, by treating her like an object devoid of inner life. He also realizes that he has wronged himself by having for so long crudely sought nothing but material wealth:

> Buying this house, land, becoming big man. Nothing in all these things. Only violence. Taking is violence … Just wanted the thing I could see, touch and be sure. What to be sure? I can't die. How can I die? The mind isn't full to be emptied. The body isn't there for the blood to go cold … This is the dying. Having not lived, this is the dying. (*HTT* 46)

Muthu's search for the Tiger has attracted considerable interest from commentators. Wong Phui Nam, for instance, interprets it as a symbolic movement towards "interior night," a quest for "a state of being that transcends the personal ego."[52] Muthu comes close to entering into the night known by contemplatives as "'the dark night of the senses', the night which precedes the even darker 'night of the spirit'." But he fails to go any further, because he clings to worldly acquisitiveness, to things he can see, touch and be sure about. Wong makes a compelling case in arguing that *HTT* finally indicts the

[52] Wong Phui Nam, "Story of an Inward Quest," *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur; 29 April 1992): 37.

"grasping attitudes prevalent at all levels of economic life in our country."[53] Textual evidence may be easily gathered to support this reading. In fact, Maniam himself would probably support it, seeing that the philosophy he espouses is radically anti-materialistic: "I want to see destructuring so that man can get to be himself [...] I don't see why human beings should serve out their lives in this materialistic sense."[54] Be that as it may, and without detracting from Wong's interpretation, it is possible to show that the bone of contention for Maniam is not so much the ills of capitalist modernity as "cultural entrapment," the "reluctance to enter into perspectives offered by other cultures."[55]

In his paper "The New Diaspora," Maniam provides his most elaborate interpretation yet of *HTT*. Consider his reading of Zul and Muthu, which we may provisionally apply to *IFC*'s Zul and Rajan. According to Maniam, Zul lives by "the way of the tiger" – he believes in "the continual and ritualistic immersion into the spirit of the land so as to be reaffirmed." Muthu/Rajan, by contrast, lives by "the way of the chameleon." He adapts and blends "into whatever economic, intellectual and social landscapes that are available." While Zul believes in cultural purity and loyalty, Muthu/Rajan yearns for something less confining. On the symbolic level, Muthu/Rajan is looking for *Bangsa Malaysia*, a "much more seamless Malaysian society" that transcends race and religion. He seeks a national identity that *all* Malaysians can share. But he is unable to find it, because it "has not yet been evolved [...] There isn't a common reality accessible" to all. Consciously or not, Malaysians in general have come to believe that a common Malaysian identity is an impossible dream, that superficial togetherness is all one can hope for, and that "pragmatic tolerance" is the best option available to a country where race conquers all. Maniam admits that pragmatic tolerance has, "at its most constructive level, generated mutual respect and the love for peace between and among the various races" in Malaysia. Ultimately, however, it makes for cultural entrapment. It ensures that "each community remains within its cultural territory and tries not to transgress into the cultural domains of other communities."[56] It isolates and freezes everyone in their respective cultural cocoon. It closes off the borders of their awareness and puts them at risk of turning into Beautiful Souls, subjects of narcissism who live in fear of besmirching the purity of their cultural Thing.

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[53] Wong, "Story of an Inward Quest," **38**.

[54] Greet, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," **6–7**.

[55] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **21**.

[56] All quotations in this paragraph: Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **20**.

Because the phenomenon of Beautiful Soul cuts across all boundaries, all ethnic communities in Malaysia would have in their fold members who believe that "extreme, even absurd, form of cultural loyalty" is a virtue.[57] However, unlike their non-Malay counterparts, Malay loyalists in the mould of the earlier-described Malay intelligentsia are by far the most active and vociferous in urging their community to defend and remain eternally faithful to their race and religion. Routinely, in gatherings and through the media, they divide the nation and deepen their community's insecurity by reiterating the mantra that the Malay race must stay united and that Malay privileges are far from secure from 'outside threats', the precise nature or identity of which is rarely made clear but is implicitly understood to mean the non-Malays, the Christian West, and Jews, all pictured as obstacles standing in the way of the full flowering of the Malay race. It is towards this end that Malay loyalists devote their time and energy instead of encouraging Malaysians of all backgrounds to work genuinely towards "interaction, acceptance, a process of growing towards something we can call 'us'."[58] Furthermore, Malay loyalists are the ones who possess sufficient political clout to style multi-ethnic Malaysia after the self-valorizing images of their race and religion. They articulate and implement national policies in an idiom that is "highly ethnicized and deeply pro-Malay."[59] Most worrying of all, they use their status as 'sons of the soil' to impose upon ethnic minorities the Malay Law of their Heart, which they mistake for the necessary Law of Everybody. As an example, Maniam cites the Malaysian civil service, which has long been inclining towards a code of ethics in terms of dress and manner that is closely aligned with Islam.[60] It may be a good thing, Maniam says, but "in a way it is turning away from other cultures, which is a sad waste of cultural resources."[61] "Why make one culture dominant? Not because of its accumulated wisdom but its cultural arrogance."[62]

These are all crucial points we must keep in mind when reading the following often-quoted passage from Maniam's "The New Diaspora":

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[57] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **22**.

[58] Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam.

[59] Shamsul A.B., "Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: 'Malayness' in Postwar Malaysia," in *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey and the United States*, ed. Dru C. Gladney (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, **1998**): **141**.

[60] Maniam, in Greet, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," **3**.

[61] Maniam, in Greet, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam, **3**.

[62] Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam.

> The 'tiger' represents the land, Zulkifli the Malay and Muthu the Malaysian-born Indian. Muthu never makes the 'leap' for he is confronted by more than the sense of discretion for the other's nationalistic yearnings that tolerance implies [...] The leap is not made into a common culture for this common culture has not yet evolved. What Muthu discovers is that he has to cling to an inherited sense of culture, that is, Indian culture.[63]

The above passage is not, as it appears, Maniam's interpretation of *HTT* in a nutshell. Maniam is far from simplistically suggesting that Malays are inherently oppressive and self-obsessed and that Indian-Malaysians have no choice but to cling to the Indian culture because the sought-after Malaysian identity has not yet evolved. From the full essay in which the passage occurs, we know that the real divide, in Maniam's eyes, is not between Malays and non-Malays but between those who want to "entrench themselves more deeply within their own cultures" and those who choose to "come out from them and reach out to the world."[64] Put simply, the problem is mind-set, not race.

Apart from contradicting its context, the above extract (if taken literally) also flies in the face of *HTT*, the text itself – but how? Consider Maniam's description of Muthu as having to cling to the Indian culture. Reading *HTT*, one would scarcely find any evidence to suggest that Muthu identifies with the Indian culture. Instead, what one would find is a egocentric individualist like Rajan who sees himself as someone set radically apart from everyone else and who shows no interest in things Indian. As a young man, Muthu refuses to return with his parents to India, the country from which they came: "They can give up this land for a life they've known," he thinks. "But what do I have to give up?" (*HTT* **38**). After his parents set sail, he marries the young girl he had seen in a nearby estate, only to ignore "the innocence and the unbounded mysteries that lay hidden behind the sari-veiled figure" (**41**). India(nness) is clearly not Muthu's Thing, if his actions are anything to go by.

Law is Law

In *IFC*, Rajan is not only spared Muthu's fate but is reunited with Zul many years after their failed encounter with the Tiger. This is the reunion that paves the way for Rajan's arrival at "an even more substantial grain of truth" and "a new openness to life" (*IFC* **167**). The reunion is prompted by a realization that suddenly dawns on the unmoored middle-aged Rajan while reading a

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[63] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **20**.

[64] "The New Diaspora," **18**.

book given to him years before by Sivasurian (Siva), an enigmatic friend and vagrant-philosopher. A compendium of Siva's writings, the book has no title but it contains a section entitled "Not a Story, Not a Chronicle" wherein Siva contemplates life and ethnic relations in the pre-independent Malaysia of the 1940s. Interestingly, the country in Siva's account is already home to the *Bangsa Malaysia* symbolically pursued by Rajan and Muthu. "There was so much togetherness, trust and innocence. We didn't behave like single men or women but more like a people with a common heart and mind" (*IFC* 111). "There was always sharing" (106) despite food shortages caused by the Japanese occupation of the country (between 1941 and 1945, twelve years prior to independence). Exchanges of small tokens of friendship between members of different ethnic communities were not uncommon:

> **I [Siva] gave him [Sulaiman, a Malay villager] some *brinjals* and maize; he gave me a comb of bananas and some groundnuts. These things became our kind of greeting and understanding. He [Sulaiman] sometimes came to Murugiah's house [where Siva stayed] and we sat under the tall, many-branched tree. We sat talking as man with man, not as people made different by their own kinds of worship and living.**
>
> **Not only the two of us. There were meeting grounds where more of us gathered.** (*IFC* 106; typeface in the text distinct from the rest)

All this changes when the Japanese surrender and leave the country. Invisible walls rise up everywhere and people become peoples, always wary, suspicious, fearful of each other. "Now there were many countries inside that one country" (*IFC* 116). It is not clear whether Maniam intends Siva's idyllic account of Malaysia's lost unity to be read as springing from "a memory, a vision, or both."[65] What is clear is that it prompts Rajan to go on a journey "to that region where [he] can meet Zul and try to look at things ["life and country"] through a different lens" (118).

Rajan packs a bag and sets off on a journey to the north of the country to "bring back some people I [have] left out of my life" (*IFC* 119). On his way to the village where he hopes to locate Zul, he passes through small towns "barely touched by the modern rebuilding spirit" (120). In the town where his land-development business has its origins, he chances upon his old friends Jimmy and Ramasamy, now resembling the hemmed-in peoples Siva had encountered everywhere after the Japanese occupation. "Jimmy Kok has become paunchy and is coarser in the face, which is heightened by the secretiveness of his eyes. Ramasamy simply rattles on, indifferent to what the others

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[65] Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'," 259.

have to say" (**121**). When Rajan finally meets up with Zul ("Pak Zul – that's how people address him now"), he finds that the latter too has changed (**121**). Zul is hospitable as to a stranger; his eyes glow with "suspicion and hostility" when he first sees Rajan. The reception by Zul's wife is no warmer: Kak Jamilah "did not hide her resentment and indifference towards me. All the time I stayed in her house [...] she kept away from me. She put the dinner and the lunch on the table and withdrew" (**121**). Rajan subsequently learns that misfortune has befallen Zul's family since they last saw each other. Times have been bad in the *kampung*. "There isn't enough land for our own planting," says Zul (**122**). Worse still, Zul's eldest son, Mat, has been locked up in an institution after running amok and hacking a man to death.

According to Zul, it all began when Mat left the village for the bright lights of Kuala Lumpur after being exposed to "ideas" through books and television (*IFC* **129**). Mat wrote home during his first few months in the city; then there was a long silence. A year later Mat came home. "He had long hair and had grown a beard. His mother nearly fainted. His brothers and sisters were too afraid to go near him" (**123**). He kept to himself, talked with some invisible friend for a long time, and fought with enemies his distraught family could not see. On rare occasions he would open up to talk about the city, where people "cut you down without mercy [...] trampled all over you [and] built large houses over your broken bones" (**126**). Mat alternated between silence, calmness and agitation until one day, without warning, he erupted into murderous violence, injuring three men with a curved grass-cutting knife and killing another. Zul has only seen his son once since the authorities took him away. "They had shaved his head and face and filled his veins with medicine so that he looked like a child again" (**129**). Embittered by what has befallen his family and community, he tells Rajan, in a voice full of accusation:

> "When I look back I see you and others like you as the cause. We lived well, maybe too peacefully, before you all came with your ideas and your energies [...] You gave up everything to come to this land. We offered you what we had. But you all became greedy and wouldn't share. Saw no other world but the world of progress and money. And we had to make the sacrifices." (*IFC* **129**)

Zul blames modernity and 'outsiders' like Rajan for bringing to the country alien energies and ideas that "can even destroy the tiger, the oldest symbol of our [Malay] civilization" (*IFC* **129**). In his ravings, however, he never pauses to consider whether the cause of his misery might not be the world he denounces as corrupt but, rather, that which actually lies within himself, in the Tiger *qua* Malay-Thing of his Heart that serves as the aim and impetus of his moral activity. Zul does not see the internal contradictions in his conception

of the Tiger. He claims to have made Mat see the Tiger before the latter migrated to the city, where he lost his mind (**129**); but has he himself seen it? (Recall that neither Zul nor Rajan laid eyes on the Tiger during their trip to Tigerland.) Also, he harps on at every opportunity about his Tiger and its pleasurable associations, making it clear to Rajan that he cannot but follow "the way of the tiger,"[66] because the Tiger is the eternal truth of his being, the substance 'in him more than himself', and so essential to his identity as 'real Malay' that he would simply 'die' if it were ever taken away from him. Yet, despite all the fuss about it, we never see the Tiger open its mouth to spell out what Zul must or must not do in order to live the moral life. We never see it instructing him to follow, defend and remain eternally faithful to the Malay race and the way of life championed by the earlier-mentioned Malay loyalists. (The careful reader will find that all of the Tiger's dictates come directly from Zul.) In fact, the Tiger never once appears *in persona*. No one (not the reader, Zul, Rajan or Muthu) ever comes face to face with it – which begs the question: does the Tiger even exist?

Certainly, as has been established, the Tiger exists as the Law of Zul's Heart. However – and this is the crucial twist – it becomes the Law only if Zul represses into his unconscious the fact that the Tiger *qua* Law is "a capricious and arbitrary law, the law of the oracle, the law of signs in which the subject receives no guarantee from anywhere."[67] Contrary to Zul's conscious belief, the Tiger is not pre-existent, prior and external to the processes of knowledge, waiting for him to submit. Rather, it is his very submission to the Law that constitutes the Law as Law; "the Law is constituted only *in the act of the subject*."[68] Such is the self-referential logic of 'Law is Law', which "articulates the vicious circle of its authority, the fact that the last foundation of the Law's authority lies in its process of enunciation."[69] This secret truth of the Tiger *qua* Malay-Thing – its tautological nature, the fact that it is 'alive' only to the extent that it is continually resuscitated by the believer's passion – is the unthought that grounds Zul's identity as 'real Malay'. It is the truth that Zul cannot integrate into his living consciousness, for if he did, the symbolic universe he inhabits would collapse on account of its inherent inauthenticity. By disavowing the Tiger's truth, he destines himself to cling to the land and relate

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[66] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **20**. As discussed earlier, "the way of the tiger" is defined by Maniam as "the continual and ritualistic immersion into the spirit of the land so as to be affirmed."

[67] Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, **73**.

[68] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, **167** (my emphasis).

[69] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, **37**.

to the world as if the land and the Malay race were the be-all and end-all. Even worse, he defrauds himself of the opportunity to be liberated/reconstituted as a *free* subject, as he who recognizes himself as the absolute cause of the cause of himself, the One who precedes the 'I' *qua* 'real Malay'.

True Freedom

Zul's inability to surmount his Malay self and his persecution-complex is not lost on Rajan, who, having ruminated on Zul's irrationality and Mat's insanity, is now coming to realize that the "structures of our minds we see so clearly may, after all, be the first impressions of a truer consciousness" (*IFC* **136**). Hitherto as self-certain as Zul, Rajan is starting to grasp the perils of sense-certainty, the way in which overconfidence "has a way of throwing limitations around life" (**133**). He does not dispute that Zul "meant well when he tried to show [him] the spirit of the Tiger" (**144**). The problem with Zul is that he has found "Too much clarity," which is precisely "what leads to authoritative behaviour" (**144**). Without a second thought, Zul abandons himself to the immediacy of his emotional impulses, to his belief in his essential Malayness and the insular ways in which he must live his life. Till the end of *IFC*, he does not see that to act 'spontaneously' in the everyday meaning of the word is not to be free but to be prisoners of our immediate nature. To act according to our 'deepest convictions' or 'authentic inclinations' is not to be free but to be subject to the laws of causality. To gain *true freedom*, we must act freely, not in the sense of doing whatever we like or by freeing ourselves of the basic necessities of life, but by surmounting our unfreedom, our determination by and "dependence on the Other (such and such laws, inclinations, hidden motives ...)."[70] As Rajan says towards the end of the novel,

> One must be ready to let go even the most prized personal ideals and beliefs in order to come by an even more substantial grain of truth. The self, shaped by family, society, education and all that nourishes the ego, must be firmly put aside. One must escape from the prison of self-imposed or imposed upon order so that a new openness to life can be discovered. (*IFC* **167**)

Through Zul, Rajan, too, comes to recognize his own shortcomings. He sees that, even as he clung tenaciously to his individuality and self-independence, he had unwittingly allowed Zul to instil in him the belief that the Tiger might hold the key to the Other-Place where he would be truly at home. He

[70] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, **28**.

had taken the Tiger as a Transcendental Authority located outside himself, something to which Zul had more of a claim because of his ‘blood connection’ to the land. He had looked upon it as “a spiritual goal” (*IFC* **141**) instead of what it really was: the obstacle preventing him from seeing that the Tiger was never out there but was always-already within himself. In other words, he had overlooked how *he was his own Tiger,* the presupposed messianic Other whose ontological guarantee he had sought for his existence:

> I discover that the qualities of the tiger are not out there but lie dormant within me. No wonder it has taken me so long to discover its presence! [...] I see the true ramifications of that search for the tiger. I see now how I found a tiger for myself: in my attitude to my profession, the country and life. (*IFC* **143–44**)

If we accept that Rajan finally recognizes himself as the cause of his cause, what, then, is the significance? And how does it relate to Malaysia and its politics of nationhood? In order to flesh out the answer to these two questions, let us take a step back to retrace the path of Rajan’s self-recognition.

After leaving Pak Zul’s village, Rajan goes back home but keeps to himself, not yet ready to return to family life. He has yet to gain full access to the Tiger’s secret at this point in the novel. As he says, “The borders of my consciousness are still not sufficiently destroyed for me to know the heart of that country” called life (*IFC* **137**). Lying in bed one afternoon in a semi-conscious state, he returns in thought to the jungle into which he had trekked with Zul long before. This time, without Zul by his side to guide and impose on him, he traverses the fantasy-jungle with an agility of his own. “There is no more an eye, neither Zul’s nor the tiger’s, watching” (**138**), he says. “I’ve suddenly become the eye itself. A lidless eye so that nothing can be blinked away; so that nothing can be distorted” (**138**). In Rajan’s gaze, the fascinating Tiger first appears as a stain that condenses all that he “can’t [won’t?] understand” (**140**), something to which he presently has the urge to pay homage. To offer it sacrifice, he hunts and skewers a boar to death through the anus, decapitates it, and spills its blood in a circle: “I’ve made my sacrifice and my spirit is light. I know the tiger won’t harm me for I’ve left the boar’s carcass in the centre of that holy circle. I am now part of the tiger and it contains everything that needs to be known” (**142**).

Immediately after the sacrifice, Rajan sees signs of the Tiger’s absent presence everywhere: in a flower bud, the green of the trees, a sapling, an anthill, and in the very silence of the jungle. So absorbed with what he sees that he ‘loses himself’ in the act. That, it suddenly strikes him, is “the ultimate sacrifice needed to gain access to the tiger’s presence: the giving up of the self” (*IFC* **142**). If Rajan was against the idea the last time, he is convinced this

time around that it is only rational for him to subordinate his will to the Tiger. With that 'realization', his spirit becomes even lighter, as if a heavy burden has been removed. "There is no more necessity to understand not only myself but also all those shapes, objects and the network of creepers that seem to be always changing. There is no more need to worry about the force behind the changes. There is only the need to be subservient and to accept" (**142–43**).

Rajan is now burning with the desire to be fully released from the burden of thinking and bearing responsibility for himself. He feels his skin peeling and his flesh "merging with the flesh of another, the other" (*IFC* **143**). The merging process has begun, but something is blocking the way. A voice from within Rajan is protesting, piping up "like the voice of my childhood when innocent and therefore made bold, I accepted nothing, submitted to nothing." Rajan is torn "between wanting to be merged with the tiger and the need to be *really free*" (**143**; my emphasis). "The idea that nothing of me [his will to self-determination, not his Indianness] will ever remain appals me." Finally, he decides that he cannot and will not give up his urge to self-determination. With that decision, the vision vanishes and Rajan starts to feel, for the first time in months, the trickle of vitality returning to his body and mind.

Malaysia Noire

Rajan has passed the trial of fire, has "freed [his] mind from all kinds of suppressions and repressions" (*IFC* **145**), and has gained access to the Tiger's truth. But his journey is not yet over. "Just when I thought I had reached some sense of peace and clarity, I find odd things happening [...] Strange interferences – that's all I can call them at the moment – are coming into my sleep." These "strange interferences" centre on a dark microcosm of Malaysia, a settlement not unlike others in the country. Overcast by the shadows of conspiracy, it is home to citizens who live in trepidation of the country's leader, whose absent presence is all-pervasive:

> We, the ordinary citizens, are somehow aware of the leader's presence all the time.
> […]
> Any man suspected even of thinking of subverting the leader's leadership is taken away and has things done to him. When the man returns, he is so docile even Mani the goat has more spirit. But quite often things don't get that far. There are check systems already operating at lower, ordinary levels.
>
> These watch-dog institutions are not that obvious to the ordinary eye. They work through existing customs and rituals practised by the various communities. (*IFC* **146**)

The customs and rituals Rajan refers to involve some form of sacrifice. Flowers, food and slaughtered animals are offered to deities, gods and the dead. They are usually found in graveyards, temples and shrines beside bends in the road. Offerings – "the most colourful and abundant" (*IFC* **147**) – are also made to men occupying high positions of power, usually complemented by the best caterers, a live band and a cultural dance performance. Lastly, there are what Rajan calls "cultural sacrifices" that "weld us together in obedience to the ruling regime" (**147**). Members of the community who partake in cultural sacrifices may slaughter a buffalo, a goat or a pig. They may do so for a variety of reasons: for the enjoyment of it, as a way of expressing allegiance to their community and so on. On that level, cultural sacrifices such as these are neither wrong nor harmful. They only become insidious when we believe that "our culture is not whatever beliefs and practices we actually happen to have but is instead the beliefs and practices that should properly go with the sort of people we happen to be."[71]

Walter Benn Michaels argues convincingly that culture is today's politically correct way of continuing racial thought. It functions as race the moment we take what we do (our customs and rituals) as something we *should* do because of who we are 'deep inside', our race *qua* fantasmatic Thing in us that makes us 'us'. As Michaels puts it, "It is only the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture, restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos."[72] We see this demonstrated in *IFC* by the inhabitants of Rajan's dark world, including Ramasamy, Jimmy Kok and Zulkifli (representing respectively the insular Indian, Chinese, and Malay).[73] Along with a host of hostile, faceless figures, they pressure Rajan to recant his 'heretical' belief in self-determination and to embrace racial determination:

> "Why are you like this?" Ramasamy says. "You're one of us and yet you're not one of us."
> "Can't a man be just himself?"

[71] Walter Benn Michaels, "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* **18**.**4** (**1992**): **683**.

[72] Michaels, "Race into Culture," **684–85**.

[73] The role Ramasamy and Jimmy play in the dream sequence is different from their role in the demolition-scene we discussed earlier in this chapter. The inconsistency is strategic, in that Ramasamy and Jimmy are not, like Rajan and Zul, fully-fledged characters but multipurpose caricatures that Maniam uses to convey different messages at different points of the novel.

> "When you were born did your mother leave you naked?" he asks and when I don't answer he says, "She wrapped you up in the clothes of our [Indian] culture. See how it has fed you and strengthened you. Gave you mind and spirit."
>
> "I can find them by myself," I say and he laughs.
>
> "You've to fight everything our culture gave us," he says.
>
> "I will."
>
> "You'll be dead before you find anything," he says and goes away. (*IFC* **155**)

From behind the businessman's mask, Jimmy Kok, too, tries to steer Rajan back on to the sanctioned path, but Rajan remains as headstrong as before. Instead of unconditionally accepting the nature of things as defined by Jimmy, he finds holes in it:

> "You say things too openly," [Jimmy] says. "You must hide your real self. Otherwise you'll be in danger."
>
> If I'm not myself I'll be in danger." I say.
>
> "See what I mean?" he says. "There are eyes and ears everywhere."
>
> "Why are they everywhere?" I ask.
>
> "We live by rules here," he says. "They can't be broken. New ones can't be made until everyone agrees."
>
> "If everyone agrees how will the new be found?"
>
> "This is an old story," Jimmy Kok says. "There can be no new rules."
>
> "So sacrifices must be made?"
>
> "We've been friends for a long time," he says. "This is the only way I can help you. By giving you advice. Play the game."
>
> "If the game is bad?"
>
> "Don't say I didn't warn you," he says and walks away, disgusted. (*IFC* **156**)

Zul conducts himself no differently from Ramasamy and Jimmy in the dream sequence. Even though he has overcome his sorrow for his son, he has yet to emerge from "the darkness of the limited mind" (*IFC* **153**). To him, race is still everything. True to character, he chastizes Rajan – this time for not showing due respect for the Other's unique Thing. He is saddened that Rajan does not appreciate the site of the Other's culture as a sacrosanct domain upon which outsiders must never trespass. Until the end, he neither sees nor appears to care that the beliefs he champions "build up walls" and "prevent us from knowing each other, knowing ourselves" (**157**). He does not see that when communities keep to themselves and respect other communities' enjoyment of their own Thing only from afar, they are – *by that very act* –

creating "many countries inside that one country" (**116**). Performatively, they ensure that *Bangsa Malaysia* will always remain a pipe-dream and that Malaysia will always be racially divided.

What I have just delineated here is an *effect* of pragmatic tolerance (discussed earlier with regard to *HTT*). Pragmatic tolerance causes what it says Malaysia can never achieve, precisely by presupposing that the various races in the country are as different from each other as chalk and cheese. It turns on the assumption that, given the insurmountable differences between the races, superficial togetherness is the best that the country can hope for, and that the best way to realize this is to appeal to 'universal' values (love for peace, desire for economic and educational success, etc). Pragmatic tolerance does not see that "the common ground that allows cultures to talk to each other, to exchange messages, is not some presupposed shared set of universal values, etc., but rather its opposite, some shared *deadlock*."[74] It does not see that cultures only truly communicate when they "recognize in each other a different answer to the same fundamental 'antagonism', deadlock, point of failure."

Members of all cultural communities are everywhere the same insofar as they share the same ontological wound – insofar as they are, as subjects, always already internally antagonized, prevented inwardly from achieving full identity-with-themselves. To occult the lack at the heart of their subjectivity, the castration that is the inheritance of every human subject, they have but language to spin out soothing fictions about how their cultural universe was once complete and how the Enemy is responsible for its present incompletion. They cling to customs and habits they call culture in order to assure themselves that things will become better if they never stop practising what they claim as inheritance, even though it was left to them by no testament. Until they traverse their fantasy, they will not see that culture is not, as we saw in Chapter **6**, the truth of one's being but the effect of its absence, a genealogy of failures to capture one's essence beyond the wall of language. Until then, they will not see that, yes, we lose our pride, the comfort of the familiar and our symptoms when we relinquish our illusions of knowing and admit that what is most precious to us is, in the last instance, a gift of shit. "What do we have to gain? Some space of freedom to breathe deeply, some chance to change, to live, love, laugh. And maybe the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation from 'within', which Lacan placed before the second animal death, or mortal one."[75]

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[74] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, **31**.

[75] Ragland, "The Discourse of the Master," **146**.

Rajan, unlike Muthu in *HTT*, gains the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation. But he is the odd man out, at least in the nightmare-world that thinly disguises contemporary Malaysia. There, as in Malaysia, non-compliance with social dogma invites disciplinary action from the government.[76] For being a "deviant" (*IFC* 158) and for not "spreading and upholding the administration's policies" (148), Rajan has to be punished, just as Mani the recalcitrant goat in the novel is ritually slaughtered for having the courage to show his true feelings so openly. Mani is, interestingly, similar to Rajan in spirit; he "isn't like the other goats, cowed" (147). His eyes have an indeterminate quality about them; it is as though they were the apertures of a deeper awareness. "He is almost human in the way he looks at you; almost human in the way he protects his freedom. He doesn't allow anyone to put the rope around his neck" (147). As if to express what he thinks of the ruling regime, Mani farts raucously while a politician is half-way through pontificating "about how the administration has only the welfare of the people at heart" (149). When the politician persists in his praise of the administration's far-sightedness, Mani uncouthly fills the air with the stink of a goat's pellet-dung and urine. He gets away with it, but is soon caught and ritually prepared for castration before the presiding politician. "Watch this carefully [...] He has to be taught a lesson" (153), the executioner says to the crowd before pulling out a curved knife and making an incision from Mani's penis sheath to the scrotum. The executioner then slices downwards until he reaches Mani's throat. Mani stays proudly silent and indifferent to pain, which infuriates his executioner into discarding his professionalism and to hack savagely at Mani's throat. Mani is then skinned and dismembered before the crowd rushes forward to carry away this or that piece of him, all looking in the politician's direction with "devotional gratitude" (155).

After Mani comes Rajan's turn to be neutered in the interest of the nation. Still in the nightmare sequence, a strange machine with many instruments descends on Rajan to "get at the root of [his] uselessness" and make him "one of us": "I feel suction-like pads on my head, face, chest, thighs and feet. Then

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[76] Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) is routinely used by the ruling regime to crack down on dissent and opposition. In the year 2001, for instance, 2,520 people were detained under the various detention-without-trial laws. Among those detained were ten key leaders from the Keadilan (the National Justice Party) and SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia, a Malaysian human rights group), including Tian Chua (the Keadilan vice-president). See SUARAM's Executive Summary of Malaysian Civil and Political Rights 2001 at <http://www.suaram.org/hr_summary_2001.htm>.

the machine pauses as if it has found the source of my non-conformity. There is a sharp pain as a clamp is riveted to my temples; a sharper pain when a casing is fitted to my testicles and penis" (*IFC* **158**). Rajan struggles and lashes out until he is woken from his Kafkaesque nightmare by his wife Santhi.

Arriving …

Although Rajan gained access to the truth of his being before the strange interferences began, it is only now – after the nightmare – that he wakes up as a different person, as someone perceptibly more 'at home' with himself: "I've become a dreamer since I returned. No, not in the escapist sense. All I want to see is life unfold itself in its entirely" (*IFC* **171**). This is not to suggest that Rajan has 'arrived' and that his life will thenceforth be free from strife. At the point when the novel concludes, he still has to reconcile himself with his wife after years of having reduced her to the level of object. And he has his children, Ravi and Sivam, to protect from the curse of the eternal return which he can already see dancing in their eyes.

Rajan feels responsible for having somehow 'maimed' the older boy, Ravi, who is the more thoughtful and determined: "I saw in him a younger version of what I had been and turned away in disgust" (**188 – 89**). Sivam, the younger boy, is not as set in his ways. He still has some fluidity of accommodation in his personality. But already Rajan has seen in his eyes "the flicker of light that had played in Mani's eyes" (**189**). Disconcerted, he asks his wife if he had somehow, by his actions or inactions, "turned them away from being themselves" (**189**). Had he somehow altered their destiny in the way that a woman he remembers from his childhood had altered her child's destiny? Rajan recalls how the woman, once the beauty of the rubber estate and a model Hindu wife, gradually lost her youthfulness and turned bitter from the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. In a powerful moment in the novel, she is seen sitting in the doorway of her house, hugging her pregnancy and saying:

> "Little one, you about to be born, listen. You came into my womb violently. I didn't want you. The man put you there while smelling of drink and vomit. Other, worse things are smelling inside him. He has made me smell too. When you come at last into this world, you won't be drinking milk from my breasts. You'll be drinking bitterness, hatred, suffering. You can stop the suffering if you try. You must get the strength for that from the little milk you can receive from my breasts. If it's not the custom for a son to beat his father, you must break that custom. You must break his head and spill his blood. There won't be

> any brains to spill. So, son, you must be stronger than your brothers and sisters [...] You must be hard. Hard like a twisted metal that can't be twisted any more." (*IFC* 183–84)

The last Rajan saw of the family before he left the estate many years before, the child was already showing signs of becoming his mother's desire. There wasn't anything the child didn't leave ravaged: plants, windows, clothes, bicycles. "He was defiant for the sake of defiance. His mother had been successful in passing this spirit to him while he was still inside her" (*IFC* 184).

IFC closes on a disconcerting note without confirming or dismissing what Rajan fears might be history repeating itself. It leaves the reader to ponder whether every generation does not inherit the ring of the eternal return which it must break in order to come into freedom. The close is quintessentially Maniam. Victory is never complete in this writer's universe. We need only recall how, although Ravi returns to himself in *TR*, his triumph is sapped by his father's suicide. Maniam explains the logic behind his work:

> I don't think many of my characters reach what you call a full sense of achievement at all, or a sense of completeness or a sense of fullness; they are always somewhere progressing towards it but they don't quite get there and I think that progressing towards it would define what I believe is humanity always progressing in that sense towards a completer image of itself. You don't quite get there because if you get there then you would all be dead, reaching a point and not going forward in this field.[77]

Maniam's logic of non-arrival applies not just to his fictional characters but also, ultimately, to Malaysia and its peoples. Maniam says that his greatest fear for Malaysian society is that they want to be stable and enjoy the pleasures.[78] He recognizes that Malaysians have generally come to accept and even appreciate authoritarian rule, norms and institutions. They are grateful for the government-promoted 'golden formula' (obedience to the government, pragmatic tolerance, Malay supremacy, eternal Malay hegemony) which permits them to live in comfort, work, and earn a good living from their toil. Some might disagree with the government's 'divide the races and rule' policies, or with the way it plugs for the Malay race to be put on "a very high pedestal."[79] Rarely, however, do they have the will or the courage not to play

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[77] Greet, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," 7.

[78] Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam.

[79] Maniam, in Tan, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking 'The Universe in Man'," App. 1, p. 7.

the game. This could be due to a variety of reasons: fear of being taken away and having things done to them by the representatives of the "watch-dog institutions" (*IFC* **146**), fear of accidentally destroying "the society we've so carefully built" (**158**), and failure to see that the alternative to the 'golden formula' is not anarchy, as the government would have them believe. One can doubtless argue that the Malaysian general public may well have been conditioned to fear and regard the government as the end-point of knowledge and the final authority on life. But as Maniam asks, "Does that mean conditioning is always one-hundred percent effective? Need it be effective, unless you surrender to it?"[80]

Rajan is Maniam's proof that one can *not* surrender one's will to self-determination to the government, however paternalistic it may be as the agent of Law. Against Sarvan, who rather cynically interprets the protagonist as trying to "pass off his essential powerlessness as virtuous restraint and democratic accommodation,"[81] I would argue that Rajan, like Mani, not only acts agentively in accordance with his beliefs, he is even – like Dad in the *abiku* trilogy – prepared to pay the price for it. For refusing to say that the Emperor is not a naked abuser of power, he is singled out for castration. At the end of *IFC*, Rajan emerges as an unlikely hero, a "political strong poet" (Laclau), a "subject of drive" (Lacan), a "god" (Okri), or what Maniam calls "the universal man"[82] and "the new diasporic man."[83]

Rajan belongs, namely, to a new diaspora in Malaysia, a fragmented and dispersed community of men and women from all backgrounds, all of whom are concerned with the quality of thought and life that can be made available to the Malaysian populace. As Maniam further describes it, "Their approach to individual, historical and socio-cultural developments is markedly different from that of the cultural loyalist; they will not subscribe to the concept of pragmatic tolerance discussed earlier."[84] They do not, like the cultural loyalist who follows the way of the Tiger, "seek to be reassured by an imagined cultural stability." They recognize that "man has been artificially categorized into a monocultural, ethnic and political being when multiplicity is his true nature."[85] Reading Maniam through Lacan, we might say that they fully assume the uttermost contingency of their being. They recognize that "no-one

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[80] Lim, Interview with K.S. Maniam.

[81] Sarvan, "Ethnic Nationalism and Response in K.S. Maniam's *In A Far Country*," **72**.

[82] Maniam, *Haunting the Tiger*, xii.

[83] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **23**.

[84] "The New Diaspora," **22**.

[85] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," **23**.

arrives; there is no platform where one can stand permanently"; instead of lamenting their fate and blaming the Enemy, they find *jouissance* "in being in a state of always arriving rather than having arrived."[86] The new diaspora seeks to influence through "the more persuasive imaging of a vision in the present."[87] It may be a small group but it is not powerless, for although its members may not always realize it, all social influence is ultimately a process of minority influence, and at the bottom of any process of social influence there is always a relatively small social group.

[86] Maniam, in Wilson, "An Interview with K.S. Maniam," 22.
[87] Maniam, "The New Diaspora," 22.

Conclusion

> Perhaps […] our very physical survival hinges on our ability to consummate the act of assuming fully the "nonexistence of the Other," of *tarrying with the negative.*[1]

A Way of Being Free

THE NATION IN ITS PRESENT FORM may wither away in the future, to be replaced by other forms of organizing human collectives. We might see a re-ordering of the world into something like the World State conjured up by Aldous Huxley, or into regional blocs like the Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia imagined by George Orwell. It is also equally possible that we might see the creation of some other novel mode of organization which nobody has yet been able to imagine. For now, though, the nation is here to stay and it is within the nation, with all the opportunities and limitations it sets up, that Okri's and Maniam's key figures, such as Dad, Ravi and Rajan, have little choice but to find a 'home' in and for themselves. Caught in the flux of historical change, they are acutely aware that their desire for happiness and ontological plenitude (to be attained through the elimination of suffering, the filling out of the emptiness in themselves, and so on) and the thwarting of their desire cannot be understood in isolation from the larger forces around them. In varying degrees of social and political consciousness, they realize that things outside of them have to change before they get better, that there are structures of oppression to dismantle, the disease of political corruption to eradicate, one-sided histories to be rewritten, and so on. But they also realize that it is just as crucial, if not more fundamental, to change the way in which one relates to the absolute Thing of one's desire, and to realize that one

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[1] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, **237**.

is not only much more unfree than one believes, one is also much freer than one knows.

We have seen this expressed in different ways by different characters throughout our discussion. In Okri, we saw how, because the nation-peoples (berated by Dad for their sheep-like philosophy) believe they cannot not choose the Bad (by clinging to their tribal and religious myths of supremacy, tolerating tyranny, and supporting corrupt politicians) over the Worse (by acting to realize greater freedom), they condemn themselves to a life of unfreedom. By contrast, Dad fully assumes the Worse. Realizing that there is no gain without pain, he readily risks it all and cuts himself loose from the things through which corrupt politicians try to keep him in check: his personal well-being and even his life. In doing so, Dad creates a space for himself and others to dream the nation afresh and make that dream real. By his actions, Dad demonstrates that we are, to paraphrase Zupančič, free whether we want to be or not, free in both freedom and unfreedom, free in good as in evil, and free even when we follow the trajectory of natural causality.[2] In Maniam, the logic of freedom is articulated in the movement of Ravi's and Rajan's consciousness towards self-supercession, in their passage from desire to drive, and in the ultimate recognition of the fact that, despite their cocksureness about their independence of will, they had been acting under the shadow of the Other. Ravi and Rajan, unconsciously subordinating themselves to their libidinal Thing, had committed the ethical crime of living in a deficit of existence. In the end, however, they recognize their complicity in the creation and perpetuation of the dilemma they face. They recognize themselves as their own making, as the absolute cause of the cause of their desire. No longer hiding behind the Law, they recognize that the Law is the necessary Law of their Heart only insofar as they personally institute it as such. Because Ravi and Rajan fully assume the contingency of their subjectivity, they get the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation from within. By contrast, Zul, the 'real Malay', never accepts that he is the Tiger he seeks, the One who chooses the Law that chooses him. He rejects the power of choice and is condemned to live in perpetual dread that the Other may steal from him the freedom he himself had rejected. He tries to impose upon 'outsiders' what is, in effect, his desire for unfreedom, outsiders living in the land he calls his own, and ends up holding himself and the nation back from discovering "wider and more inclusive centres for the understanding and assimilation of larger areas of life."[3]

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[2] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, **39**.
[3] K.S. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre."

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA, and with the increasing momentum of the war between Islamists and their Other, it has become all the more urgent for cultures everywhere to come into self-knowledge, to traverse the fantasy in such a way as to be free of the illusion that, by denouncing and defeating the Enemy, the past and all that is valued as heritage will be redeemed, dignity will be restored, and society will finally return to a state of edenic fullness. Cultures need to see that "true loyalty to a tradition lies in recognizing in the past its transient and historical character, its difference [from] the present (a difference that involves continuities and discontinuities at the same time), and not in transforming the past into a model and an origin to which one tries to *reduce* the present through more and more absurd and less credible [...] manipulations."[4] Cultures need to understand that the proper response to events following September 11 is not to withdraw into their blameless selves like sensitive plants and denounce the world as wicked. The proper response should be the inverse – for cultures to come out of their cocoons long enough to see that, if the world is to have a chance at all, each and every culture must refuse to give its own organization, values and social order the elevated status of *fundamentum inconcussum*.[5]

Overcoming Passions

At the time of writing this, Kelantan and Trengganu (two of eleven states in Malaysia) have gazetted the Islamic law of Sharia (Hudud and Qisas) as state Law. The Law presently applies to Muslims (all Malays by default) but will be imposed on non-Muslims (non-Malays) "when every citizen understands [it]," says Abdul Hadi Awang (president of the PAS, the Islamic fundamentalist party that introduced the legislation).[6] The marriage of state and religion has far-reaching consequences, for Sharia covers all aspects of living. Among other things, the Law can be used to bar non-Muslims from having any real policy-making role in government. It also allows the religious authorities to amputate the limbs of convicted thieves, behead murderers, and stone adulterers and homosexuals to death. The PAS's Islamist vision has been widely condemned as retrogressive by concerned non-governmental organizations and sections of Malaysian society. "It reflects the narrow-mindedness and

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[4] Laclau, *New Reflections*, 193–94.

[5] Laclau, *New Reflections*, 187.

[6] Cited in Lim Kit Siang, "Media Statement on PAS' Syariah Criminal Offences Bill, dated 10 July 2002," *DAP*, <http://malaysia.net/dap/lks1715.htm>, accessed 11 July 2002.

lack of understanding of modern issues by the leaders," says Maria Chin Abdullah, the executive director of a women's group. The DAP, in a press statement, makes it clear that the party opposes the move not because it is anti-Islam, and not just because it is "insensitive to the multi-religious and multi-racial society of Malaysia," but also because it is "incompatible [with] the principles of democracy, human rights, justice and freedom."[7]

In response to criticisms of his Islamist utopia, Hadi Awang says that the public has paid too much attention to the Law's punitive aspects, so much so that its "beauty" has been obscured.[8] The legislation, he explains, actually signals the dawn of a post-political era. It will ensure a safe, peaceful, crime-free and fully constituted society, as exemplified by countries like Saudi Arabia and Sudan, which have implemented Islamic Law. It is bizarre, to say the least, that Hadi Awang should use these two countries as models for Malaysia to emulate, for it is well-known that they have the worst human-rights record in history. According to Amnesty International, "Secrecy and fear permeate every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. There are no political parties, no elections, no independent legislature, no trades unions, no Bar Association, no independent judiciary, no independent human rights organisations."[9] The situation in Sudan is even worse. Mohamed al-Amin Khalifa, a leading northern Islamist, claims that "Sharia leads to low crime, low prostitution, low numbers of AIDS cases, and a sense of tranquillity. It is a deterrent."[10] In reality, Sharia has, since its introduction in Sudan by the former ruler Jaafar Nimeiri in 1983, bitterly divided the war-torn country between the Islamist north and the animist and Christian south. In present-day Sudan, it is used as the justification for militant Islamists to gang-rape women and slaughter Christians who refuse to convert to their faith.

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[7] Loke Siew Fook, "Press Statement by DAP NS Assistant Organizing Secretary and DAP NS Youth Pro-tem Committee Chief, dated 11th July 2002," *DAP*, <http://www.dapmalaysia.org/english/bul/jul02/bul1678.htm>, accessed 12 July 2002.

[8] Lim Kit Siang, "Media Statement on the Second Phase of 'No to 911, No to 929, Yes to 1957', dated 14 July 2002," *DAP*, <http://malaysia.net/dap/lks1726.htm>, accessed 15 October 2002.

[9] "Trade Union Action 2000: End Secrecy and Suffering," *Amnesty International*, <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/tunion/2000/main.html>, accessed 16 October 2002.

[10] Andrew Hammond, "Peace and War: Islam Could Divide Sudan," *East African Standard*, <http://www.eastandard.net/wednesday/eahome/story04092002006.htm>, accessed 16 October 2002.

Although plans for the enforcement of Hudud may be rolled back in Trengganu, now that the PAS has lost control of the state to the BN, and although the number of the PAS's state and parliament seats was reduced in the 2004 general elections, it would be premature and naive to claim that Islamism in Malaysia has been neutralized. The dip in the PAS's political fortunes in the recent elections is due primarily to its failure to deliver the minimal level of development expected by its Malay-Muslim supporters and sympathizers, not because it plans to elevate Hudud above the Constitution. This view is supported by a recent survey which reveals that forty-nine per cent of Malays favour the implementation of Hudud, while fifty-two percent see Hudud as the answer to reducing crime.[11] Even if Hudud never gets to where the PAS wants to take it, there is still grave concern over the lengths to which the UMNO and the Malay-Muslim moral majority will go in the name of Islam, and the price to be paid not only by non-Malay-Muslims and Malay-Muslims who reject the Islamists' racial and religious chauvinism, but also ultimately by the nation itself. It does not bode well that the BN government has, in its bid to strengthen Malay-Muslim hegemony, declared that Malaysia has always been an Islamic state, even though, as we saw in Chapter 2, the nation's founding fathers never conceived it as such. Nor does it bode well that Mahathir, whose views are shared by racist Malay-Muslims in the country, warns that "minority groups have no mandate to determine or question whether Malaysia is an Islamic country or otherwise."[12]

It is true that, in this post-September 11 world, it has become "very fashionable to present the Muslims as particularly susceptible to being crazy or blowing themselves up."[13] In the face of mounting hysteria, one must be careful not to defame Islam as the "most stupid" of all monotheistic religions, as has Michel Houellebecq, a well-known French writer who was sued in 2001 (but

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[11] Rose Ismail, Shareem Amry & Sharon Nelson, "Opinion: Malays trust ulama to tell the truth more than anyone else," *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur; 29 February 2004). The survey was conducted by Merdeka Center and Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa, National University of Malaysia, and financed by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

[12] Ronnie Liu Tian Khiew, "Media Statement on Malaysia and the Issue of Islamic State, dated 24 September 2002," *DAP*, <http://www.dapmalaysia.org/english/bul/sep02/bul1748.htm>, accessed 15 October 2002.

[13] Dr. Maher Hathout, a scholar at the Islamic Center of Southern California, cited in Yotam Feldner, "Inquiry and Analysis No. 74: 72 Black Eyed Virgins: A Muslim Debate on the Rewards of Martyrs," *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA7401>, accessed 22 November 2001.

subsequently acquitted) for allegedly inciting religious hatred against Muslims. Likewise, one should not, when opposing the logic of Malay supremacy and the unconstitutional islamicization of Malaysia, follow in the footsteps of Houellebecq. One should instead endeavour to show, as I have attempted to do in this book, that the political desire of Hadi Awang and Malay-centric Malay-Muslims is not only unethical in the Lacanian sense of the term but also fatal.

Nigeria, which has had a head start in implementing Sharia, provides a good example of what might be in store for Malaysia should it persist in its Islamist course. Since the year 2000, twelve of thirty-six states in Nigeria have introduced Sharia penal legislation, a move denounced as unconstitutional by thoseNigerians who vehemently oppose it. Since then, lashings for infractions such as drinking and disturbing the peace have been doled out on a daily basis in the Sharia states. Many have had their limbs amputated and at least two women have been sentenced to death by stoning for having a baby out of wedlock. One of them is Amina Lawal, a 30-year-old woman whose death sentence has outraged civil society in and outside of Nigeria. Amina Lawal's sentence has even prompted Soyinka to go on radio to rebuke the states for "putting us through this very sadistic charade in which human beings are being made the mere game of politics in a very traumatic way."[14] He insists that the mobilization of Sharia is "a pure political ploy," a cynical "attempt to create a crisis – a pure political crisis – because of disgruntlement with the current government. There is nothing really religious about it. I mean, what excuse do these people – who are just another group within a multi-religious plurality – what excuse do they have?" Soyinka's outrage is justified if we recall the widespread religious violence that Sharia has touched off. One of the worst incidents of carnage and devastation occurred in Kaduna and parts of Southeastern Nigeria in 2000, where more than two thousand people were reported to have been killed. In his sombre speech following the incident, President Olusegun Obasanjo said:

> I could not believe that Nigerians were capable of such barbarism against one another. But what I saw there was perhaps even more gruesome in detail [...] The devastation was so massive, it seemed as though Kaduna had overnight been turned into a battlefield […] All so suddenly, people who had been their neighbours for decades turned on them, and massacred them. And yet, those who were responsible for these murders claim that they were acting in defence of faith or reli-

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[14] "Head to Head: Nigeria's Sharia Law," *BBC* (20 August 2002), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2205295.stm>, accessed 15 October 2002.

> gion [...] When all the statistics of the devastation in Kaduna, Kachia, Aba and Umuahia are recorded, we will find, I am sad to say, that this has been the worst incident of blood-letting that this country has witnessed since the Civil War.[15]

Much has been said about the Sharia issue in Nigeria. It has been said, for instance, that the imposition of Sharia leaves Nigeria "with its left foot in the Stone Age and its right foot in the Information age."[16] It has been said that Sharia allows Muslim leaders to shift the blame of evil to Christians, capitalism and adulterous women. It has also been said that the problems faced by the Muslim North "cannot be solved by seeking divine guidance or fighting Christians" and that the North should instead "declare a *jihad* against illiteracy, overpopulation and AIDS which is spreading like wildfire in Nigeria." But what does one say to someone like Abdul Majeed, a primary-school teacher in Shuwarin (a remote village in northern Nigeria), who believes that "with Sharia it is going to be a very good, decent society, with no harlots or drunkards […] All those unwanted customs that are not in our blood, are going to go away"?[17] Is Abdul Majeed accountable for the installation of the Islamist Thing at the centre of his libidinal world? Is he responsible for the pleasure and pain, and the good and bad he derives from being faithful-unto-death to it? Is he an autonomous individual who consciously chooses his absolute cause and therefore his destiny, or is he just a simple villager who knows not what he does? The short answer is yes: he is fully responsible for his relationship to his Thing; and the long answer is this book.

[15] Olusegun Obasanjo, "Text of Speech (1 March 2000) following religious crises […] in Kaduna and parts of Southeast Nigeria and suspension of full implementation of the Sharia in Zamfara, Sokoto and Niger States," <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/speech/obasanjo_sharia_address.html>, accessed 14 October 2002.

[16] Philip Emeagwali, "Sharia Crisis in Nigeria," <http://emeagwali.com/interviews/sharia/crisis-in-nigeria.html>, accessed 15 October 2002.

[17] Barnaby Phillips, "Sharia Marches On," *BBC* (October–December 2002), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/focus_magazine/archive/nigeria/sharia.shtml>, accessed 14 October 2002.

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Appendix 1

Synopsis of K.S. Maniam's Unpublished Novel *Delayed Passage*

DR. KUMAR RETIRES, in the mid-1990s, from the Social Anthropology Department of a local university, disappointed he could not assimilate into Malay culture and society. Resolved, therefore, to have nothing to do with the world for the rest of his life, he cocoons himself within a precarious tranquility. But this isolation soon gives way to his attraction to his young widowed daughter-in-law, Sumathi.

She has come to his house with the vague idea of tracking down his son's spirit, appeasing it, and so releasing herself not so much from the grief as the guilt she feels over his death. Kumar agrees to help her in this bizarre quest, for the inexplicable and youthful fascination he develops for her sensual presence has somehow to be satisfied. He listens to her self-exploratory stories, and, when he is alone, reconstructs with voyeuristic eagerness her married life with his son.

When he finds a crucial letter from his son and shows it to her, in order to re-create for her his voice, Kumar's mask of aloofness and moral imperturbability crumbles. Sumathi, too, subconsciously realizes that she has inherited the immorality of her adoptive mother. Seized now by a trance-like urgency, she sees in Kumar his son, and Kumar, lost in his trance of sensual attraction, borrows his dead son's brooding air and gestures, and, ceasing to be the father, becomes the son. On the verge of satisfying his incestuous impulse, he pulls away from her, suddenly aware of a mythic innocence flooding over him.

He now enters the past he has avoided in an attempt to track to its source this mythic innocence, which he senses is closely tied to his regression and his straying from the true path of self-fulfilment. He sees that it is his empty shell of a father, a victim of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, who has been

driving him towards an early sense of himself. This is to be like Faizal, his Malay classmate, who is not only sensuous himself but also enjoys a sensuous relationship with the land.

Kumar spends as much time as he can with Faizal, away from his poverty-stricken family living on a depressing rubber estate; surrendering to instinct, he allows Faizal to initiate him into the seasonal pulse of the land, a rite of passage that climaxes in ritual immersion in the river, from which he emerges feeling that he has somehow caught a glimpse of his essential self, and can now confront the shrieking wilderness that lies ahead of him.

All this changes when he meets Hashim at the teacher-training college he and Faizal attend several years later. Hashim fuels Kumar's latent imagination with his seductive interpretation of the country's history, and convinces him that there is a deeper way to belong to the land. The spell he casts wears off when they are posted to their old school and must turn to the practicalities of getting on with their lives. They marry: Faizal a Malay girl his mother finds to match his boisterous nature; and Kumar, still under the spell of the empty boldness of some of the college women, the brooding and rebellious Devi, from a family ruled by the mother's sense of Hindu tradition.

It is about this time that Kumar gets a further glimpse of himself, Faizal and Devi, as coming from that mythic source, untouched by intellectual, cultural or political corruption of the self. However, Kumar does not accept this abstract sense of self; he has no desire to drift away, as his father had done, into some void.

When Hashim reappears in his life, Kumar sees him as an odyssean cultural hero, and is eager to fashion himself after this image. But Hashim, influenced by the May **1969** race-riots, has already discarded his liberal-humanist approach for an anticolonial and more narrowly nationalistic one. Kumar, too, coming from immigrant stock, sees that the only way to become truly Malaysian is to cleave as close to the land as a Malay does; consequently, when he goes to study at the university he becomes physically and emotionally distanced from his family. Devi withdraws into a marbled remoteness, which he fears but explains away as a relapse into an atavistic version of the Hindu woman.

After the family shifts to Kuala Lumpur, Devi emerges from her state of withdrawal to remind him, through house-blessing rituals, of his cultural roots. He himself organizes a house-warming party, during which Azman, a *wayang kulit* puppeteer, has a profound effect on him and a racially mixed audience with a malayized version of the *Ramayana* episode of Sita entering the flames to prove her purity. But Kumar ignores the broader cultural implications of these occasions, and goes the other way: he surrenders to the process Hashim has indirectly designed for his assimilation into Malay culture.

This takes place on Badnock estate, where Kumar meets Ramasamy, a man renowned for living within a deep silence. Kumar sees this as a withdrawal into Indianness, and he helps Hashim's henchmen to flush out this cultural nostalgia in Ramasamy and its suspected residue in himself. When Kumar returns to his family, he does so as one who has made a successful cultural cross-over.

The distance between himself and his family widens: Devi withdraws into her marbled remoteness; his son, Surin, who had earlier rebelled, now turns away from him; his elder daughter, Sunita, tries to bring him to his senses and, failing to do so, marries Sunder, a bank clerk, and leaves the family; his other daughter, Janaki, heads off to America to make a life for herself. From this time onwards, Kumar and his wife lead separate lives, wholly removed from each other through an unbridgeable and unexpungeable silence.

His situation at university is no better. Hashim feels that he has created Kumar too much in his own likeness, and, by extension, fears a cultural displacement if the process of assimilation is allowed to continue. This fear is transmuted into self-assertion and a lust for power. He enjoys having Kumar at his beck and call, and, influencing others to keep away from him, finally turns him into a reflector of his own power. Kumar sees that his dependence on others for a life has, ironically, brought him close to being the empty shell of a man his father had been.

Emerging from these recollections, Kumar realizes that he has to confront the marbled remoteness from which he had long ago turned away. He discovers that it is not only an inborn capacity for endurance in women, but also a deep source of strength and openness in all individuals. And to acquire this inner and inventive sombreness one has to tread the path of humility. He therefore goes to pay his daughter Sunita that long-overdue visit. He is received with cruel coldness, but feels nevertheless that he is prepared to face whatever humiliation his wife and daughters may have in store for him.

His readiness is put to the test at a special family reunion dinner, when the womenfolk turn into the priestesses of a necessary and cathartic ritual. By enduring the humiliation, he buries his past, distorted self and regains his place in the family and a sense of balance. His memory begins to filter back, and with it his original and more encompassing imagination.

He now sees that everything is integrally connected, and although he has been forced to retire ignobly from the university, he helps a Malay student with his doctoral research; he picks up his relationship with Faizal from where it left off; and he tries to persuade Hashim to approach the history of multicultural Malaysia more objectively. But Hashim looks at him askance from behind the smooth face of a self-assured cultural arrogance.

Nagged by doubt that his may be only a subjective experience, he sets out to find out whether this racial and cultural exclusiveness has taken firmer root elsewhere. While this process of discovery takes the form of a walk through a busy Kuala Lumpur street, it also an odyssean spiritual undertaking. Leafing symbolically through the history of the country, he discovers that there is no common cultural memory, and that the main culture has sequestered itself behind the smooth, inaccessible face of self-absorption.

Taking a symbolic bus ride towards the future, he realizes that he has become a womb-like intelligence, waiting for a burst of light to pierce the membranous mists of another awakening.

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