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Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia

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I, Mary Susan Philip, declare that this thesis is an original piece of research and, except where otherwise acknowledged, all conclusions are my own.

(Signed) [Signature]
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Abstract

Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia

This thesis will study identity in Malaysia and Singapore as a performative construct, and will analyse the role of the theatre in the deconstruction and reconstruction of these identities. Identity is constituted by the authorities in both countries, most importantly along racial lines, for particular social, political and nation-building strategies; these authoritative constitutions are increasingly disrupted and challenged at the individual level. In studying the construction of identity, my focus will be on the post-independence English-language theatres of Singapore and Malaysia, and how they are used to challenge, question, and negotiate with authority-constituted identities.

The question of identity-constitution will be approached through a reading of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. This theory suggests that gender identities are performative, that is, that they are (usually at an unconscious or subconscious level) created and acted out. While Butler’s focus is on gender identity, my reading will expand that focus to also include national, racial, and transnational identities.

If an identity is acted out, then it can also be re-acted differently, or reacted against. In Malaysia and Singapore, the theatre functions as a public but nonetheless unofficial space in which such re-acting or reacting can occur, where state-constructed identities can be countered by individual constitutions of identity. In both countries, the theatre is a particularly vibrant, lively and rapidly developing site of expression which provides fertile and compelling ground from which to study the constitution of identities.

This thesis will comprise five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. Chapters one and two will examine changing attitudes towards national identity. Chapters three and four will narrow the focus from wider public issues to more private issues such as an individual’s construction as a racialised or gendered being. Chapter five widens the focus again, to look at conceptions of national identity within an increasingly transnational world. Overall, this thesis will look at the slow growth of overarching Malaysian and Singaporean identities which, while they grapple with the inescapable question of race, also reconfigure that question into new and thought-provoking forms, challenging the essentialising hegemony of the state.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Barisan Nasional: The National Front, also referred to as BN. This is a coalition fronted by Malaysia's three main racially-based political parties, namely UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). BN has been the ruling coalition since Independence.

Bumiputra: A Sanskrit derived word meaning 'son of the soil.' In Malaysia it refers to the Malays, and indicates their indigeneity to the nation.

Internal Security Act (ISA): This act, a holdover from British colonial rule, allows for the detention without trial of anyone suspected of endangering the security of the nation. It is still in use in both Malaysia and Singapore.

New Economic Policy (NEP): This was a socio-economic policy introduced in Malaysia in 1971 by then-Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. Its stated aim was to eradicate poverty, and to re-distribute wealth so that there was less identification of economic function with racial group. The underlying function was to raise the economic status of the Bumiputras.

PAP (People's Action Party): The PAP has been the ruling party in Singapore since 1959.

Short Titles Used for Plays

The plays to be studied in this thesis will be referred to by the following short titles:

Are You There, Singapore?  AYT
Changi                                Changi
Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral     Descendants
Desdemona                             Desdemona
Family                                Family
The Happening in the Bungalow         Happening
Lela Mayang                           Lela
Mergers and Accusations               Mergers
One Year Back Home                    One Year
Rosnah                                Rosnah
The Sandpit: Womenis                  Sandpit
Scorpion Orchid                       Scorpion
A Tiger is Loose in Our Community     Tiger
We Could **** You, Mr. Birch          Birch
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Introduction

Identity Construction in Malaysia and Singapore: Essentialisation and Hybridity

In a review of Malaysian playwright Huzir Sulaiman’s anthology *Eight Plays*, the critic Antares states that the play *Those Four Sisters Fernandez* “represents the playwright’s exploration of his own Malayalee [sic] roots” (“Brilliant” 5). The comment intrigued me; in Malaysia, where every individual is labelled and categorised into various boxes according to race and religion, Sulaiman is considered primarily as a Muslim of Indian (specifically Malayali) descent. And yet, in choosing to explore his heritage, he has decided to focus on the lives of four Catholic Malayalis. Thinking about the surprise engendered by his decision to look at a Christian rather than a Muslim family, I realised that I, like so many other Malaysians, almost instinctively think in terms of differences rather than commonalities. I did not focus on aspects such as a shared language, zooming in instead on the great gulf between the different religions.

This instinct arises from the fact that our identities as Malaysians have been constructed by the state in very specific and calculated ways: we have been trained, perhaps constrained, to accept definitions of ourselves within narrow boundaries of race and culture, constituted by the state and prescribed to individuals as the only legitimate means of identifying themselves within the confines of the state. The cultural and ‘racial’ identities with which most Malaysians and Singaporeans now identify are in fact state constructs, conceptualised at the authoritative level as being monolithic, unproblematic and easily defined within rigidly drawn boundaries. Generally, however, they are not recognised as being externally constituted rather than inherent. The state has buried the constructedness of racial identity by positing race as primordial and connecting it directly with cultural practice. Relentless repetition of race as the central defining factor of existence in Malaysia and Singapore has normalised it, so that it has in fact become a common part of the vocabulary of quotidian life.

Race is not, however, the simple business posited by the state. At the level of everyday, lived reality, the racial construction of identity is complex and problematic.
Identities in Malaysia and Singapore are racially, linguistically and culturally hybrid. The exclusion of this organic hybridity at the authoritative level creates tension between officially mandated, essentialist identities and the lived identities of individuals. John Clammer comments on the co-existence of both these identities, noting that Singaporeans can generally switch between public/national and private/ethnic spheres: “This may sound schizophrenic to an outsider but in practice the maintaining of these two spheres works very well and efficiently and simultaneously allows for expression of a national identity as Singaporeans and a private identity as members of a specific cultural minority” (Race 67). This comment is equally valid for the situation in Malaysia, where individuals also switch from one level of identity to another, depending on the situation. Malaysians and Singaporeans use the officially imposed racial identities whenever necessary (in most situations involving the civil service, for example); generally they do not evince any great discomfort with these labels, accepting that there is a basic truth in these arbitrary categories which tie them to particular countries of origin. But these are not necessarily the categories by which they define themselves or their experiences. At a practical, personal level, assigned labels are overridden or ignored, although this is not usually done deliberately, or with intent to challenge the authorities. Few people would be aware that when they define themselves in ways other than those approved by the state, they are questioning state constructions of identity. However the very fact that it does occur suggests an underlying feeling of discomfort or dissatisfaction with these constructions. Despite this, in most social interactions, there is a deep-seated impulse to affix labels, to name the other person. Almost inevitably, that person will, in fact, in some way be identified as ‘other’ – from a different race, cultural background, linguistic group, religion.

Personal experience has led me to ponder the instinct for categorisation, manifested in the desire to define and separate. In official terms I am defined as Malaysian (by nationality), Indian (by race) and Christian (by religion), and am further assumed to speak Tamil, even though my mother-tongue is Malayalam and I actually speak only English and the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. I, like most Malaysians born around or after Independence, have had reason to question what these defining terms actually mean. What does it signify that I am Malaysian? In what ways can I realistically be called an Indian? Why must I be further defined by religion and
(erroneously) by language? What significance can these factors have in my interactions with other Malaysians? Now I watch my young son struggle uncomprehendingly with these categories; his confusion is evident when he declares that, since Chinese people speak Chinese and Malay people speak Malay, he must obviously be English. ‘Indian,’ to him, is a meaningless term: he speaks no Indian language and his cultural references come straight from the Disney Channel. Despite my own uneasiness with them, I find myself resorting to those same old divisions, reminding him that although he is Malaysian, he is also Indian (or, more specifically, Malayali) and Christian. I thus knowingly collude in his construction as an individual defined in narrow terms by race, culture, language and religion. And yet at the same time, my insistence on asserting the particulars of my son’s ethnic and religious background stems from a desire to foreground an identity that does not conform to the essentialising categories formulated by the state. By insisting on the fact that he is Indian, Malayali and Christian, I challenge those who think entirely in broad and generalising sweeps, stating that as Indians we must be Tamil Hindus or, conversely, that if we are Christian, we must be Eurasian.

My ambivalent reactions point to two factors: the extent to which the impulse to categorise and divide according to race and religion has become inherent in most Malaysians, and the simultaneous discomfort with these categories that is felt by many Malaysians born after Independence. I see in this dichotomy both the regulatory power of the divided identities constructed by the authorities – that is, the success with which these identities have been inscribed on the populace – and a potential space of failure where constructed categories might begin to be questioned, and consequently to be deconstructed, thus allowing for the production of alternative identities.

Taking off from my personal confusion, I have decided in this thesis to look at identity in Malaysia and Singapore as a performatve construct, constituted by the authorities in both countries for particular social and nation-building strategies, and increasingly countered at the individual level. Given the shared history and initial similarities between the two countries, an examination of the now quite radical differences between them will add resonance to the study of how identities are constructed in each country, and why they are constructed in these particular ways.
In studying the construction of identity, my focus will be on the post-independence English-language theatres of Malaysia and Singapore. As I shall explain in greater detail, the theory of performativity suggests that identities are performative, that is, that they are created and acted out, usually at an unconscious level. If an identity is acted out, then it can also be re-acted differently, or reacted against. In Malaysia and Singapore, the theatre functions as a public but nonetheless unofficial space in which such re-acting or reacting can occur, where state-constructed identities can be countered by individual constitutions of identity.

Performativity and the Construction of Identity

As will be discussed in the next section, identities in Malaysia and Singapore are constructed by the state. The authorities have named, or defined, particular racial, religious, linguistic, and national identities which they find acceptable, and individuals in turn are required to assume one of these identities, or else be deemed aberrant. However, these state-constituted identities are presented as being natural, even primordial, so that adherence to them appears inherent rather than enforced. Joel Kahn points out that the national project to construct Singaporeans "as radically different from each other" has been so successful "that most Singaporeans today have almost entirely internalized what was at the outset a highly arbitrary system of racial and cultural classification" ("Introduction" 6). An artificial, politically-motivated system of classification has been engineered so that Malaysians and Singaporeans accept it as being an intrinsic part of who they are, and what makes them Malaysian or Singaporean. Nirmala PuruShotam argues that "the socially reproducible, and, reproduced nation of an elite's imagination is perceived generally as 'our' normal, moral way of life" (Negotiating 5). This allows for considerable control by the state over its citizens. For these reasons I argue that racial, national, cultural and gender identities in Malaysia and Singapore are performative. What makes the construction of identity here particularly interesting is that its roots are still visible; it is possible to trace the moment when a specific identity was brought into being by a performative utterance from the authorities. Despite this, the inscription of these identities on the populace has been highly successful; and yet, because of the visibility of the roots,
there is great potential for the re-writing and re-inscription of identities along lines not chosen by the authorities.

My reading of the authoritative construction of identity in Malaysia and Singapore is based on Judith Butler's re-visioning of J. L. Austin's work on performative language. Austin defines performative speech acts as those that construct the reality of which they speak, that is, as utterances "in which to say something is to do something" (147). His most well-known and oft-cited example refers to the statement "I now pronounce you man and wife;" here, the statement itself changes the state of the two people involved, legally naming them as husband and wife. However, merely speaking the words does not suffice to bring something into being; Austin goes on to assert that in order for a performative to function 'happily' (that is, to work), there must be an accepted ritual to be followed, there must be someone 'appropriate' to actually carry out the ritual which must also be done correctly and completely, and the people involved must experience the appropriate thoughts and emotional responses (148).

Butler's revisioning of the theory of performativity focuses on gender identity, seeing it as a phenomenon performed or created by an external agent, through (for example) socialisation and regulation, rather than as the internal, 'natural' essence it is commonly taken to be. In my application of this theory, however, I will expand this focus to include other identities such as national, racial and transnational identities.

Taking phenomenology as her basis, Butler explores the idea that gender identity is performatively constituted, following on from the idea that "social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" ("Performative" 270). However, where other phenomenologists assume the presence of a subjective agency in the constitution of social reality, Butler sees the social agent as more acted upon than acting. The individual does not constitute social reality through "language, gesture, and [...] sign," but is instead constituted by these various acts. That is, what is generally taken to be the individual's inner essence is performatively produced by the constitutive acts mentioned above. Speech, gesture and sign produce the individual; they do not express the individual's pre-existing essence. As Butler explains further, if gender attributes (the signs and gestures by which gender
is ‘known’) “are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (“Performative” 279). If gender identity is performative, then there is no internal core or essence which establishes gender, although gender identity is treated as an essence. Rather, the attributes which are supposedly revelatory of that core in fact constitute the core. The attributes, then, are the identity, because there is no inward, fixed core which they reveal or express.

This is an interesting development of Austin’s work, where, as Butler points out, the implied power of the speaking subject to actually create that which it names is suggestive of the divine: “According to the biblical rendition of the performative, ‘Let there be light!’ it appears that by virtue of the power of a subject or its will a phenomenon is named into being” (“Burning” 205). Butler is suspicious of the idea of an empowered, fully agential subject. Her postmodern questioning of the existence of an empowered self leads to a position of scepticism about the possibility that there is an independent, pre-existing self at all. She rejects Erving Goffman’s assumption of individual agency, suggesting instead that the “self is not only irretrievably ‘outside,’ constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication” (“Performative” 279). This implies that the individual is unable to create an interior ‘self.’ What is taken to be interior is in fact created externally, in social or state discourse, and imposed on the individual. The power of this construction to convince comes from citation and repetition within the context of society. Butler notes that Derrida reworks Austin’s argument to suggest that performative power only comes from citation and repetition (“Burning” 205). A performative statement acquires its force only because it has been repeated, and accepted at each repetition as having a basis in authority; constant repetition and citation can in fact create that authority. The individual who speaks does not, on his or her own, have the power to give the words their binding force. Each individual thus lacks agency, as he or she is repeating rather than (as Austin suggests) creating.

We can see here a central tension in the concept of performativity. If identities are constituted – if their reality lies in the external performance rather than in some
inward ‘truth’ – then there should be a certain element of freedom in the production of identity. As Butler points out, if all gender identities are performed rather than innate, then the individual’s reality would depend on the individual’s performance, “and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (“Performative” 279). Yet patently this freedom does not exist, and “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (“Performative” 279). This brings us back to Derrida’s point: for a performative to have force, it must have the strength of repetition and citation behind it. Performativity is strategically controlled and regulated so that what is performed is a norm which satisfies particular social programs. Normative heterosexuality, for example, is “an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality”, thus assuring the continuation of the human population (Butler, Gender Trouble 173). Over time, gender has been performatively constructed as a binary, linked directly to biological sex; acceptable gender identities are heterosexual man and heterosexual woman. To go back to Butler’s earlier point, the external attributes which identify gender under these conditions have been normalised such that they are now taken as outward expressions of inward truth. The performance of gender identities which do not adhere to the norm, then, are seen as deviations from the true identity, an ironic view if we consider Butler’s assertion that “there would be no true or false” (“Performative” 279). Externally constituted gender identities have been set up and normalised in such a way that they are both regulated and regulatory, creating both the accepted centre, and the margins to which non-conformist identities can be consigned. Mary Douglas suggests why such regulation is seen as being necessary:

[…] ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (4)
However, Douglas's argument assumes the existence of binaries and inherent differences. Given Butler's rejection of binaries and core gender identities, it is possible to read the urge to regulate as having more sinister overtones. It is only by postulating a 'true' or 'right' gender identity, that it is possible to specify what is 'wrong' or 'deviant.' What is implied here is the exercise of collective (social) power over individuals.

Butler acknowledges the imposition of power, but she does not deny all agency to the individual: "As a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" ("Performative" 282). She asserts the possibility of innovation, but is aware that power is exercised over individuals, as suggested by her use of words such as "punishments," "out of turn" and "unwarranted improvisations;" however, she is also aware that individuals have the power to contest such impositions "through subversive performances" ("Performative" 282). What is required is that the individual not treat constituted gender identities as "a natural or linguistic given" ("Performative" 282).

Butler and other theorists of the performative stress that by and large, social agents are unaware that social reality has been performatively created. Butler emphasises that a performative can only be effective if it disguises its performative nature, that is, if it is taken to be natural or inherent: "It is not simply that the speech act takes place within a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualized practice. What this means, then, is that a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" ("Burning" 205). A performative, then, is not successful because of the exercising of individual will, but because repetition over time has naturalised it and disguised its constituted origins. 'Normality' is a function of the constant repetition of the performance. Butler reinforces this point by stating that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" ("Performative" 270). In this formulation, identity does not give rise to acts; repeated acts give rise to a particular, regulated identity.
Although Butler has formulated this theory specifically in relation to gender, it can also be applied to other aspects of identity, particularly those that seem to be ‘in need’ of regulation. Gender is not the only category which can potentially constitute “a site of pollution and endangerment” (Gender Trouble 168) in a social system. Caste, language, social class, and religion, for example, are authoritatively-constructed regulatory systems. In theorising gender as constituted, Butler focuses on the role of the body in bearing the cultural meanings which come to signify particular genders. She asserts that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body,” and points out that social reality is constituted through physical or embodied means such as language and gesture (“Performative” 270). She also cites Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for both of whom “the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities” (“Performative” 272). The body can be, and is, appropriated by authority to embody these possibilities so that it will serve particular political ends; the constitution of gender identities, for example, serves the needs of heterosexual reproduction.

I would argue that other identities – racial identities, for example – are also performatively constituted, with bodies being manipulated to carry certain politicised meanings. External bodily markings (skin colour, shape of eyes and noses, texture of hair, and so on) have been cited as signs of ‘belonging’ to a particular race. Racial identities are considered primordial, and, as with gender identities, their constituted origins are disguised or hidden, so that they appear inherent rather than constructed. Butler refers to the academic debate on “whether or not the theory of performativity can be transposed onto matters of race” (Gender Trouble xvi), noting particularly that “Homi Bhabha’s work on the mimetic splitting of the postcolonial subject is close to my own in several ways” (Gender Trouble 192). Bhabha’s concept of the colonised subject as being “almost the same but not quite” (Location 86) points to the subject as being both constituted by the coloniser as different, and by the ‘self’ as (parodically) almost the same. This constitution of the self unsettles the colonial hegemony by parodying the colonial identity. Alicia Arrizón and Minelle Mahtani have both used performativity as a means of looking at the racialised body. Mahtani uses performativity to “show how race is actively performed and masqueraded among participants, rendering it ephemeral, such that racial categories are subtly, and not so
subtly, displaced and disrupted" (428). Mahtani's view of performativity focuses on the agency it allows to the individual to challenge constructed racial categories. Arrizón also looks at the disruptive potential of racialised bodies, stating that "race performativity [...] subverts the dominant hegemonic discourse" (149).

The responses of Bhabha, Arrizón and Mahtani indicate that they have appropriated performativity as disruptive of regulatory power and as focusing individual agency. Yet, as Marvin Carlson points out, Butler's formulation of performativity "would seem to leave little room for altering performed categories, since agency itself arises not from some choosing subject existing before the performance of identity, but rather from the 'self' constituted by performance" (Performance 171). Because of the historicity of the performance, there seems little space for individual agency; the individual's 'self' is constituted by a performance that has been repeated through time. If identities are not pre-existing, but are constituted by performance, what space does the individual have to choose? Is the identity not completely controlled and regulated?

Derrida's reformulation of Austin's definition of the performative seems to underline the individual's lack of agency; an utterance made by an individual is unlikely to be effective (that is, unlikely to have performative power) unless that utterance follows a formula that is accepted as having force:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'? (qtd. in Butler, "Burning" 205)

The power or success of a performative utterance does not come from the individual, but from a long tradition of citation. While Derrida notes that "[individual] intention will not disappear," it "will no longer be able to govern" (qtd. in Butler, "Burning" 205). Performative power comes from iterability and iteration, from an expectation that the utterance has a particular force.
Power, or force of law, is ascribed to the utterance, and it therefore becomes performative, that is, it acquires the ability to constitute that which it speaks. This seems to create a closed system wherein force is ceded to a constituting authority, which then is able to construct identities in line with its particular needs or desires. We should note, however, that the performative utterance has power only in so far as it is taken to have power. Butler uses this point to suggest that there remains some space for individual agency.

Butler believes a performative can only ever succeed provisionally ("Burning" 207). There is, then, room for failure; and within that failure lies room for individual action. The force of the performative comes from a ritualised repetition which suggests common acceptance in society, as well as ascription of power. Interestingly, the space for agency and contestation also arises from this repetition; Butler points out that: "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat" (Gender Trouble 179). Thus, there is the possibility of change, development and contestation. Constitution of identity suggests that there can be no pre-existing subject; the subject arises from the performance. Change, then, comes from the slippages and disruptions in performances that fail to exactly repeat the original.

Butler has stated that she views "constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief" ("Performative" 271). Constitution of identity thus represents power over the individual, in that it compels his or her belief. We can look at the same idea differently and state instead that the constituted identity exists only if it is believed in. What happens when the illusion becomes less compelling, for example when it no longer compels belief from the constituted subject? The possibility for agency comes about when slippages and failures in the performance reveal the "groundlessness," or the unfoundedness, of performatively-created identities (Gender Trouble 179). As noted earlier, performatives require that they be invested through repetition and acceptance with the force of law, before they acquire any power. Parker and Sedgwick add a subtle slant to this argument when they discuss the idea of "uptake," asserting that "the role of silent or implied witnesses, for example, or the quality and structuration of the bonds
that unite auditors or link them to speakers, bears as much explanatory weight as do the particular speech acts of supposed individual speech agents" ("Introduction" 7). They suggest that the auditor (that is, the person or persons to whom the performative utterance is being spoken on the assumption that it will have some effect) in fact holds a measure of power, for if he or she does not take up the utterance, that is, believe it, it will fail.

A failure of uptake can lead to a disruption of the regulatory power implied in the constitution of identities. The "regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe" (Gender Trouble 173). Butler here suggests the disruptive power of alternative bodies and identities, that is, those bodies and identities which do not fall within ordered categories. When organisation into categories breaks down – namely, when individuals become aware that the labels affixed to them might not fit – the force of regulatory law, which purports to describe rather than to regulate, also breaks down and is revealed to be regulatory. The law is not trying to describe what a particular person is, but rather to put forward an 'ideal' description, and then trying to ensure, through repetition and citation, that individuals conform with that description. The law can thus lose its power, as belief fails and the awareness grows that the inner essence it claims to describe is in fact externally constituted and regulated. This opens up a potential space for the performance of other, less regulated, identities.

The potential for contestation and agency, then, is embedded within the very process of constitution of gender identities:

The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains 'integrity' prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there. (Butler, Gender Trouble 185)
Butler does not see constituted subjects as being entirely passive – certainly, they were created, but the tools by which they were created can be turned to other purposes, reconfiguring and redeploying inscribed gender identities. The ‘new’ identities thus reconfigured are at the margins, and are therefore, as noted by Mary Douglas, potentially dangerous:

Douglas suggests that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 168)

The key here is the idea of unregulated permeability; if the vulnerable margins of the social system are freely penetrated, then its bounded systems are in danger of having their boundaries crossed, violated, perhaps opened. Such free movement will undermine the boundedness of the system and undo the “semblance of order” which Douglas suggests is the primary goal of the bounded system.

We should take note, however, that Butler does not suggest the possibility of the spontaneous creation of completely original identities. Change can only occur within the bounds of the original performance: “If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 119). Butler notes that all constituted identities follow on from previous performances: “Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being or Foucault, ‘a stylistics of existence.’ This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (“Performative” 272).

In drawing a connection between her own work and Bhabha’s, Butler cites Bhabha’s argument that “the split condition of identification [is] crucial to a notion of performativity that emphasises the way minority identities are produced and riven at the same time under conditions of domination” (*Gender Trouble* 192). This remark is singularly apposite in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, where minority identities
are indeed both produced and riven: essentialised identities are constructed authoritatively, while more particularist ethnic identities are ignored as legitimate means of identification. This statement recalls Butler's contention that: "The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations" *(Gender Trouble 117)*. The constitution of identities represents the site of a power struggle – the struggle of authority to control the individual, and the struggle of the individual to counter the hegemonic force of that authority. In Malaysia and Singapore, the power of the hegemony to construct identity is politically based. Butler "questions whether making a conception of identity into the ground of politics, however internally complicated, prematurely forecloses the possible cultural articulations of the subject-position that a new politics might well generate" ("Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory" 203). This happens in both Malaysia and Singapore, where identities are constructed as racial, and then removed from the realm of public discussion by state-engendered taboos. The identities are thus 'fixed;' re-articulations are given no room, resulting in state dominance over individual identities. This thesis will look at how the English-language theatre counters the hegemony by attempting to articulate different subject positions.

The discussion, in this introductory chapter, of performative identities in Malaysia and Singapore will focus largely on constructions of race, as it is the factor which underpins social, cultural and political interactions in both countries. Cultural, national, and gender identities are intimately and intricately linked with authoritative constructions of racial identities. This introduction, therefore, discusses race in detail, while matters such as national and gender identities, with their underpinnings of race, will receive fuller discussion in the subsequent chapters.

**Definition of Terms**

It would be appropriate to clear the terminological terrain at this point, to avoid confusion further on. The terms 'performative' and 'performativity' are used in this thesis to describe various types and levels of identity constitution. Henry Bial states that:

Performativity is a term layered with multiple meanings. On one level, it is a variation on theatricality: something which is 'performative' is similar – in
form, in intent, in effect – to a theatrical performance. This use of the term is invoked by those who wish to describe a performance without the connotations of artificiality or superficiality that accompany the word ‘theatrical.’ On another level, the term ‘performative’ refers to a specific philosophical concept concerning the nature and potential of language. (“Performativity” 145)

There is a clear link between the two meanings, in that both imply the performance of roles: one on stage, and one in social circumstances. Bial notes that both meanings are synthesised by Butler, who “explains that gender is not a condition which one has, but is in fact [...] a social role which one performs” (“Performativity” 145). It is this philosophical synthesis which is the central concern of this thesis. In her reformulation of Austin’s concept, Butler has moved away from purely linguistic concerns, to a consideration of the role of power in the constitution of identity, namely the ability of an authority to compel particular performances, and the ability of the individual to resist or reconstruct these performances. This is crucial to my thesis, as the imposition of constructed identities in Malaysia and Singapore indicates the power of the state over individuals, while any attempts at reconfiguration or reconsideration of identities indicate a desire to recover some agency.

The crucial difference between theatrical performance and the performance of identity is that the former is entirely self-aware while the latter, by definition, cannot be aware of its constructed origins. Theatrical performance is scripted, and the actors are aware of the artifice of the role they play; they know that they are putting on masks, creating characters largely through externals such as voice, face, costume, body movement. While there must usually be some degree of belief (on the part of the actor) in order for the portrayal to be convincing, this is not the central element in theatrical performance.

In the case of performative identities constituted by authority, however, belief in the performance is paramount. It is vital that individuals should not become aware of their construction, as that will then open the way for re-construction, and this will diminish the force of the hegemonic authority which constitutes these identities. If the performance is ‘believed in,’ it will be taken not as an externally imposed role, but as an expression of an interior essence. As Butler points out: “The tacit collective
agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural
fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production" ("Performativity" 273).
Authoritative performativity must, then, be blind to its own constitutiveness, as must
the individuals living under it; it must live by the logic it propounds, namely that
'identity' is expressive of an interior reality.

What happens, however, when that belief can no longer be compelled? This is
the point at which "infelicities," to use Austin's term (148), can occur. Because the
performative utterance fails, a space is opened up in which renegotiation and
reconstitution can take place. Butler asserts that in the very character of gender identity
"as a performatve resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" ("Performativity" 271); in other words, precisely because it is constructed, it can be
reconstructed. But as has previously been discussed, this reconstruction can only take
place within the boundaries already set, as there is no originating will which can allow
for the creation of something wholly original. Individuals may, then, find different
ways of performing identities, thus challenging the hegemony. The vital difference
between performativities seeking to impose hegemonic control, and performativities
seeking individual agency, is that the individual is aware of the constituted nature of
the identity he or she is playing. There is an agency, an intention, behind the
individual's constitution of his or her identity, a self-reflexive playing with identity in
response to, or as a challenge to, the impositions of authority.

I will also look at the theatre itself (playscripts and performances) as having
performative potential; that is, apart from being a medium dependent on performance,
it can also be a means of effecting particular results or actions. In taking this stand, I
am arguing against Austin and Butler, both of whom perceive theatre as being
ineffective. Austin, for example, asserts that:

[...] a performative utterance will [...] be in a peculiar way hollow or void if
said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a
soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance [...].
Language in such circumstances is in special ways - intelligibly - used not
seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use - ways which fall under the
doctrine of the etiolations of language. (151)
Words like "parasitic" and "etiolations" are suggestive of lack of energy or will, weakness, indeed even of sickness; in Austin's view, a performative utterance spoken on stage cannot have any real effect because it is valid only within the world of the stage performance. I wonder, however, if repetition and citation from the stage cannot have something of the same effect as repetition and citation within social situations. Can the theatre not use these tools to help normalise what is constructed? Is this not, for example, how propagandist theatre works? Officially sanctioned theatre in Communist China served to extol the virtues of the Cultural Revolution and the Communist way of life; 'Jim Crow' plays in the Southern United States used to depict Black Americans in stereotyped and demeaning ways. Constant exposure to such material (that is, incessant reiteration of it) without exposure to differing points of view might well create belief in the material.

In turn, then, can the theatre not be used to challenge what has been constituted, by re-constituting it and then repeating that reconstruction? The authorities have certainly long been aware of the subversive potential of the theatre, that is, its potential to cite events or issues differently, for example through parody or satire. Such citations, because they do not precisely repeat the originals, can create infelicities or failures in the authoritative performance. They can, therefore, potentially destabilise or challenge the entrenched positions of the authorities.

Butler posits that: "In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real [...]. The various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows [sic] strict lines to be drawn between performance and life" ("Performative" 278). I find it difficult, given the fact that identity is to a large extent a performance, to draw such rigid lines between performance and life, to say that one is real while the other is not. The theatre can potentially bring into being that which it names.

The actual performance of a play constitutes an important dimension in this performative role of theatre. As identities are by and large constituted physically, through embodiment – as is clear, for example, in the case of gender and racial identities – the use of bodies (of the actors) in ways that challenge hegemonic constructs is vital to their re-configuring. Physical appearance, speech and movement
are among the aspects of performance which can be harnessed to question and negotiate with authoritatively-constituted identities, while also citing and then (in subsequent performances) re-citing alternative identities.

This is particularly important in societies like Malaysia and Singapore, where physical appearance and identity are assumed, to a large extent, to be inextricably linked. As far as corporeality is concerned, the majority of Malaysians and Singaporeans think in authority-constituted stereotypes. I have been endlessly annoyed by distant acquaintances and even total strangers asking me why, if my husband and I are both Indian, our sons are so fair-skinned. Nirmala PuruShotam notes the existence of the same stereotyped thinking at the state level in Singapore: describing the typical pictorial representations of the various races on billboards depicting racial harmony, she notes the careful differentiations in the clothing and, importantly, skin tone of each race ("Disciplining" 52). The theatre can parody and undermine these stereotypical constructions in blatantly physical ways, forcing a re-thinking or re-evaluation of entrenched responses from the audience.

There are, then, three levels of performativity to be discussed and differentiated here. At its most obvious level, we can speak of performativity in a theatrical sense, referring to performances by actors, and all the associated trappings of staging - music, lights, set, costumes, and so on. At the next level there is hegemonic or authoritative performativity, which seeks to impose constituted identities, to interpellate individuals within its own constructions, while also attempting to disguise the constructed nature of these identities. Individual or alternative performativities seek to challenge these impositions, but do so in a self-reflexive manner, aware of their own interpellation within the dominant scheme.

Malaysia and Singapore: Historical and Socio-cultural Background

Authoritative identity construction in Malaysia and Singapore has been strategic and essentialising, designed to foster particular policies linked to nation building. In the attempt to pursue specific nation-building projects, the peoples of Malaysia and Singapore have been constructed as belonging to narrowly defined racial, linguistic, cultural and religious categories. Officially, it is impossible to have an identity that
does not follow these categories. It is important, however, to remember that Butler posits the potential for agency within the performative constitution of identity. In Malaysia and Singapore, this alternative constitution of identity focuses on the intentionally hybrid, challenging the hegemonic identity which is monolithic. The English-language theatre functions as a site for the contestation of essentialised, authority-constituted identities; it also explores the individual construction of more hybrid identities. The theatre challenges the attempts of the authorities to inscribe fixed, homogeneous identities by staging hybrid bodies and languages, and the hybrid spaces they inhabit.

In the wake of the nineteenth-century rise of colonialism, hybridity – initially an innocuous botanical term referring to a technique of grafting (Young 4) – came to refer to racial amalgamation and the offspring of miscegenation. Hybridity in the human context was seen as immensely threatening to nineteenth-century European enterprises such as colonisation and slavery because it implicitly challenged the myth of white supremacy. If this myth was to hold up, there was a deep need to ensure that boundary lines between races were not crossed. We come back here to Butler's citation of Douglas's point about "unregulated permeability" constituting "a site of pollution and endangerment" (Gender Trouble 168). Unregulated permeability in the form of hybrid offspring would destroy notions of racial purity and superiority, and thus could not be encouraged. The view of hybridity that prevailed in the nineteenth century was, therefore, deeply negative in tone. It was viewed negatively by many of the intellectuals and commentators of the time because it posed an overt challenge, even a threat, to concepts of racial, cultural, and ethnic purity, threatening to destroy the barriers between 'us' and 'them.'

Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha focus on the power of the hybrid to subvert and transgress hegemonic control. Bakhtin has discussed hybridisation in linguistic terms, stating that it can take two forms: "unintentional, unconscious hybridization"

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1 This term will be discussed further on in this section.
2 Arguments about this matter centered on the fertility of hybrid people, as it was understood that the offspring of a union between different species would be sterile. If, therefore, people of mixed-race descent were able to procreate, this suggested that they were not members of a different species. Some commentators therefore went to great lengths to debunk the proven procreative ability of "hybrids," or to theorise that it was a feeble sort of fertility which would quickly lose its vitality. Young cites numerous examples of nineteenth-century thought on this subject in Colonial Desire.
which takes place organically over a long time, and “is one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages” (358); and “an intentional and conscious hybrid” which is “a mixture of two individualized language consciousnesses (the correlates of two specific utterances, not merely two languages) and two individual language-intentions as well” (359). The phrase “language-intentions” signifies a will or intent to achieve something through language, and connects with the idea of performatively speaking as being able to constitute what they speak of. Where the organic hybrid unconsciously mingles two different languages or dialects, intentional hybridity suggests the presence of two different, individual agencies. Intentional hybridity has enormous political potential because of the inclusion of “two consciousnesses,” which allows for challenge and negotiation between the two. We can connect this back to the idea of the individual becoming aware of the constituted nature of the identity imposed on him or her by hegemonic authority, and choosing to constitute an individual identity in response to or reaction against the authoritative identity.

Bhabha views intentional hybridity as a subversive political tool which can undermine notions of “rigidity and an unchanging order” (Location 66), the elements on which hegemonic authority depends in order to maintain control. Hybridity connotes change and development, and thus poses a threat to the illusion of purity and stability provided by fixity.

In order to fully understand how these points are relevant to Malaysia and Singapore, and to understand what part the English-language theatre plays, it is necessary to look at the history of the two countries, and the implications of these histories for social, racial, cultural and gender construction. The past has created a socio-political environment in which essentialist, state-constructed identities are in tension with the organic hybrid identities that are the everyday reality of most Malaysians and Singaporeans. While most individuals are unaware at the conscious level of this tension, living with its day-to-day complexities, there is nonetheless some awareness among some individuals of the often poor fit between authoritative identities and individual reality. This awareness is given visibility in the English-language
theatre, and theatrical stagings often pose provocative challenges to hegemonic constitutions of identity.

Today, Malaysia and Singapore exist as two separate and quite distinct countries; Malaysia functions as a bastion of officially espoused Malay power while Singapore is viewed, and implicitly functions, as a tiny enclave of Chinese dominance in a Malay sea. However in pre-colonial times, Malaysia and Singapore were part of a large, loosely bounded area known as the Nusantara or Malay Archipelago. The Nusantara area included those countries that are today known as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines. The Malays, who are indigenous to this area, felt themselves to belong not necessarily to one particular country, but to the larger socio-geographic area. There was no concept of boundaries, nation-states and citizenship in the modern sense of these words. As Judith Nagata puts it:

Pre-colonial Malaya [...] had no political frontiers in a modern sense until they were so decreed by the gradual encroachments and requirements of a colonial power. Politically, the peninsula was long a relatively open territory, a land of pioneers and shifting kingdoms or sultanates, with a population just as varied and mercurial. (8)

Malaya\(^3\) had a long and illustrious pre-colonial history, functioning from well before 1400 as an important part of the spice-trade route.

While Malaya was long a part of the larger Malay world, it was never a homogeneous society. Its position on the trade route meant that sailors and merchants from as far afield as China, India and Arabia were constant visitors, with many settling in the area and starting families. This heterogeneity was compounded by the arrival of the Portuguese (in 1511), Dutch (1606) and British (mid-eighteenth century), who successively held power in Malaya. The Portuguese and Dutch, for example, frequently took wives and mistresses from among the local women, eventually giving rise to the

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\(^3\) I shall use the name 'Malaya' to refer collectively to the Malaysia-Singapore area before 1963, though I will refer to 'Singapore' when discussion focuses on that country alone. For the period from 1963 onwards, I will use 'Malaysia' and 'Singapore.' The whole of the Malay Peninsula was under British control by 1919; in 1957, Malaya gained independence as the Federation of Malaya. Singapore was given internal self-government in 1958. In 1963, Malaya was reborn in expanded form (including Sabah,
racial category ‘Eurasian.’ Ethnic groups such as the Baba Chinese and the Indian Chitrys grew out of the intermarriage of Chinese and Indian men with local Malay women. 4

Malaya before the British was clearly an organically hybrid community, at home with and unthreatened by identities which crossed borders of race, culture and religion. It was a society which allowed an easy and fluid mixing of cultures and ethnicities, producing an array of organic hybrid identities. It was British labour and immigration policies, set in motion during the nineteenth century, that laid the pattern for the kind of society Malaya was to become in the twentieth century.

There was, of course, a great deal of wealth to be exploited through tin mining and rubber cultivation. The British found the Malays were not interested in becoming involved in their plantation and tin mining schemes. As landowners, they preferred to farm their own land independently. The British therefore brought in thousands of labourers from India and China, the Chinese to work in the tin mines, and the Indians on the rubber estates. The population of Malaya could now be roughly divided into a few major racial groups, namely Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and Europeans; each group was assigned to particular kinds of work, following the British colonial policy of ‘divide and rule.’ 5 So effective was the British labour policy, so deeply ingrained did it become, that, to some extent, this basic labour pattern still underpins society in both Malaysia and Singapore.

The British further increased the occupational divide by advocating that the different ethnic groups also live apart from each other. In Singapore, for example, Sir Stamford Raffles decreed that each racial group be assigned to a separate part of the

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Sarawak and Singapore) as the Federation of Malaysia. Finally, in 1965, Singapore was ejected from the Federation, and the two countries took their present geopolitical shape.

4 The Baba speak Baba Malay (a form of the Malay language which includes strong linguistic influences from Chinese) rather than Chinese, and their cuisine is highly influenced by Malay styles of cooking. The traditional costume for women was the sarong kebaya, a Malay form of dress. However, they do not follow Malay religious practices (retaining their Chinese custom of ancestor worship or converting to Christianity), they cook pork (anathema to Muslim Malays), and maintain Chinese customs and costumes for major rites such as weddings and funerals. The Indian Chitty community is similar, speaking Malay and wearing Malay costume, but following Indian cuisines and religious customs.

5 The Malay peasants were left to farm their own land, while the aristocracy were steered into administration and bureaucracy; the Chinese worked in tin mines, and also became concentrated in urban centres as businessmen and traders; the majority of Indians became estate labourers; the more highly educated English-speaking Indians and Eurasians took on clerical and teaching posts.
island (Hill and Lian 114). Thus, where in pre-colonial times there is evidence of a more unproblematic mixing, resulting in organically hybrid identities, colonial policy emphasised racial difference and separateness, institutionalising this difference through official policy. There is a more sinister note underlying this idea of difference. Collin Abraham quotes the official line on how to keep native labour all too literally in place and under control:

To secure your independence, work with Javanese and Tamils and, if you have sufficient experience, also with Malays and Chinese; you can always play the one against the other [...] In case of a strike, you will never be left without labour, and the coolies of one nationality will think twice before they make their terms, if they know that you are in a position that you can do without them. (11)

This suggests a deliberate policy not only to maintain and underline difference, but to breed hostility and suspicion, specifically in the cause of economic gain. Thus an atmosphere of tension and mistrust, based on a philosophy of division, was laid as the foundation of race relations in Malaya.

Census-taking activity then formalised in print the common practices of racial categorisation. While census forms were initially very detailed, for example dividing the population into such minute categories as ‘Hakka,’ ‘Cantonese,’ ‘Punjabi,’ ‘Tamil,’ ‘Javanese,’ and so on, bureaucratic exigencies eventually led to these being crystallised into four essential groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other (shortened, in Singapore, to ‘CMIO’). We have, then, a situation in which the concept of racial identities as being different and separate has been constituted by authority; yet even though the constitution of identity in this particular manner is relatively recent in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, it has very successfully been normalised.

These identities were normalised, initially, by the insistence on the physical separation of the races from each other in different enclaves. This resulted, unsurprisingly, in the deepening of intra-racial relations. Rather than communicating and creating bonds with those of other races within the same country, migrant workers
in Malaya were more or less compelled to maintain relations with their home country, and with other migrants from ‘home,’ thus cementing their sense of being Indian or Chinese, rather than Malayan.

This sense of being in some fundamental way foreign (not only to the country, but also to the other racial groups in the country) continued despite the growing emotional investment of migrant workers in their adopted country. The migrants had initially come to Malaya for economic reasons, and “were regarded as ‘sojourners’ who would remain in Malaysia only until they had saved enough money to return to their homeland with improved prospects” (Kaur 185). As the children of these sojourners began to be born in Malaya, the idea of return to the homeland slipped away; but while the loyalty of the migrant population became more invested in Malaya, they retained cultural, linguistic, and religious patterns from home, and indeed to some extent continued to think of their original homelands as being in some way their ‘home.’ For example, Singaporeans and Malaysians of South Indian extraction frequently use a South Indian word which means ‘homeland’ to refer to India.

Initiated by British policy, racial division thus created and institutionalised a belief in a kind of racial and cultural purity among large segments of the population in Malaysia and Singapore. These policies were then continued by the post-Independence governments of both countries, in the service of nation-building projects to which concepts of racial difference and purity are fundamental. As Charles Hirschmann points out, “classification of ethnicity in a census may be arbitrary, but it is not accidental” (557).

In Malaysia, the nation is claimed in the name of the indigenous Malays; the national language is Bahasa Malaysia (‘language of Malaysia’) and the official religion is Islam, although freedom of worship is guaranteed in the Constitution. Most importantly, however, there is a strong, institutionalised educational, economic, cultural and political bias in favour of the Malays. The Rukunegara (National Ideology) and the National Anthem both stress loyalty to the King. As Heng Pek Koon has noted, “the three core identifiers of ‘Malayness’ are language, religion, and royalty” (51).

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4 For a detailed study of this process and the effects it has had on Singapore society, see PuruShotam, “Disciplining.”
Loyalty to the King, then, is a specific marker of identity for the Malays. Yet in the Rukunegara and the Anthem, all Malaysians, regardless of race, are required to profess loyalty to the King. It is entirely reasonable, of course, to expect citizens to assert their loyalty to their Head of State, but there is here a subtle foregrounding of Malay culture, a pushing of Malay culture into all cultures.

On May thirteenth, 1969, riots and communal fights broke out in Malaysia; the root cause was hostility between the Chinese and the Malays. This hostility was engendered by perceived inequity in the relative status of the two groups: the indigenous Malays found themselves to be at a distinct disadvantage in economic terms, with most of the wealth and economic power of the country in the hands of the Chinese. After the riots, the government instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP), which seeks to redress the imbalance by putting more of the wealth and power of the land in Malay hands. Towards this end, quotas favouring the Malays were introduced in higher education and employment; special blue-chip share issues are provided for Malay investment only; all new housing developments must provide a special price for Malay buyers (five to seven percent lower than the price for non-Malays). These are just a few of the affirmative action policies that have been introduced with the aim of increasing the economic participation and status of the Malays. In order for these policies to work, it must be possible to state exactly who is and who is not a Malay. Indians, Chinese and Eurasians in Malaysia are negatively constructed, that is, the primary point in their identification is that they are not a particular thing. The main dividing line in the country is between Malays (or bumiputra) and non-Malays. While non-Malay citizens are allowed most of the rights and privileges accorded to the Malays, in fundamental ways the Malays are treated as 'more equal.' Race is emphasised in the name of the creation of a ‘Malay Malaysia.’

In Singapore, however, race is emphasised in a bid to create a ‘Singaporean Singapore.’ Singapore is something of an anomaly in Southeast Asia; a tiny, resource-poor island state with a majority Chinese population, it has to tread carefully in a region of larger Malay-dominated Muslim countries. It cannot be seen to be a Chinese state or, as it is frequently expressed, a ‘Third China,’ as this would invite suspicion
and hostility from its Malay neighbours. Therefore, the Singapore government has instituted a policy of multiracialism in which each officially recognised race is ostensibly accorded equal rights and opportunities. Thus there is, for example, none of the institutionalised bias towards Malays that is found in Malaysia. Each race is assigned an official language (Malay, Tamil, Mandarin); strictly speaking, each language has equal importance in the day-to-day life of Singapore. Malay is stated to be the official national language of Singapore, but in practice English, a racially neutral language, is the language of education and everyday interaction. In Singapore, then, the authoritative construction of racial identities allows the state to actively demonstrate that its treatment of each race is even-handed.

Chua Beng Huat explains the political utility of the policy of multiracialism: by espousing multiracialism, “the government places itself in a neutral space that arguably compels it to act in ways that do not privilege any particular group; racial cultural practices are then relegated to the realm of private and voluntaristic, individual or collective, practices” (Communitarian 106). In Singapore, then, race is constructed and used in such a way as to defuse its potential as a political tool. Where in Malaysia race is used as a means of allocating political, economic and cultural power, in Singapore it is used to assure the population that such power is equally shared among all. But it remains that in order for this policy of even-handedness to all races to work, each individual must be assigned to a specific race. Multiracialism as practised in Singapore strives to suggest that all races are considered equal, but there is considerable controversy over this point, as the country comes increasingly to be seen as a Chinese state. Thus the colonial policy of racial differentiation and separation was carried on into the policies of post-independence Malaysia and Singapore. Racial difference, based on the categories implemented during colonial times and naturalised through habit, was instituted as a means of identification.

7 It should be noted that these educational quotas were officially put aside in 2002, so that entry into public universities is now based on merit.
8 Although, as noted earlier, English is the de facto national language of Singapore, the government also emphasises the importance of Mandarin, without at the same time emphasising Malay and Tamil. The centrality of the Chinese identity is thus foregrounded.
This kind of categorisation was probably less problematic in the pre-independence and immediate post-independence periods, when there was a strong, voluntary identification among the migrant population with the original homeland, and relatively little inter-racial marriage. They were therefore able to state with a fair degree of confidence that they were ‘Indian’ or ‘Chinese,’ that is, they had indeed come from India or China. Nowadays, however, the categories appear less relevant. The main problem is that they do not acknowledge the organic hybridity which is now the common experience of the population.

A Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian individual in Malaysia and Singapore cannot realistically consider her or himself to be culturally or ethnically ‘pure.’ The very fact of living in a multicultural space leads to the development of organic hybridity in language, cuisine, culture, costume, and so on. Chua Beng Huat notes the existence of several common hybrid practices in Singapore which “emerge in the interstices of the cultural boundaries of three ethnic groups; they emerge as consequences of contacts between cultures. The insinuation of such hybrid practices pushes back ethnic boundaries to create space for the inventions of new cultural phenomena” (“Culture, Multiracialism” 187). Hybridity is not only the common lived experience of Malaysians and Singaporeans, it is also, as Chua points out (following on from Bhabha’s argument about interstitial passages) a creative and inventive space when it is intentionally engaged. In many ways, it is also a dangerous space: Chua’s point about new cultures emerging as a consequence of “contacts between cultures” harks back to Douglas’s point about the vulnerability of society at its margins – it is at the margins that contamination of a society’s purity or homogeneity may begin, precisely through contact with the societies or cultures which exist just beyond its jealously-guarded borders. In Malaysia and Singapore, racial borders are constructed and guarded to such an extent that marginal or alternative racial identities are, officially, simply not allowed to exist.

This means that racial classification in Malaysia and Singapore does not admit hybridity, instead insisting that every individual adhere to a specific, constructed and imposed racial identity. Racial classification is based on patriarchal descent. Thus a man with an Indian father and a Chinese mother would be classified as Indian. Were he
to have a child with a Chinese woman, that child would still be classified as Indian. This system allows for the maintenance of a singular racial identity, despite hybridity. Information about race is recorded on the identity card which every Malaysian and Singaporean citizen must carry from the age of twelve; race must routinely be specified in dozens of daily transactions, such as opening a bank account, applying for a job, enrolling in school; most Malaysians and Singaporeans, in their interactions with each other, ground themselves by asking questions about race. An individual’s inability or refusal to specify a ‘race’ to which he or she belongs can unsettle Malaysians and Singaporeans. PuruShotam has detailed her own encounters with Singaporeans who are thrown off balance by her response, when she is asked about her race, that she is “a human being” (“Disciplining” 54). The deep discomfort felt by Malaysians and Singaporeans when they are unable to classify an individual by race is an indication of just how ‘natural’ the whole question of racial categorisation has become.

Race as experienced at the individual level in Malaysia and Singapore is subtle and complex, even though at an official level its subtlety has been ignored. All people who can in some way trace their paternal roots back to subcontinental India are officially classed simply as ‘Indians.’ Thus a North Indian Zoroastrian is lumped in the same category as a South Indian Christian. The complete lack of common ground (other than that each once had an ancestor from the subcontinent) is not considered. Even more problematically, people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan descent are also broadly considered as Indians even though, strictly speaking, they do not have an Indian heritage. The same kind of problem inheres with the Chinese; differences of dialect, religion and culture are erased as they are all subsumed under the label ‘Chinese.’ Admittedly, it is slightly easier to look at the Chinese as a homogeneous group, given that even though their various dialects may be mutually unintelligible they share a common script. But even here, complexities arise as we consider English-educated Chinese, or Baba Chinese, who might not speak a Chinese language and may be more Western or Malay in their cultural orientation, but are still considered under

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9 The newest incarnation of the Malaysian identity card does not actually state the individual’s race on the card itself. However that information is embedded in the bar code. The exclusion of racial information from the printed words on the card is a positive step, with all Malaysians being identified in an egalitarian manner as “warganegara” or ‘citizens.’ But clearly, it is still considered necessary to have that information somewhere accessible (although this is restricted to government departments, which have access to the relevant database).
the heading 'Chinese.' ‘Other’ is the category which includes everyone who cannot trace their paternal ancestry to a Chinese, Malay or Indian; it generally refers to Eurasians, which in Malaysia and Singapore refers to those with some long-ago European (usually Portuguese, Dutch or English) ancestry. The category ‘Other’ contains this hybrid and racially transgressive group, both acknowledging its hybridity and at the same time ‘defusing’ it, making it safe by giving it a label and thus essentialising it.

Racial categorization in Malaysia and Singapore homogenises what is heterogeneous, erasing particularities of culture and language with sweepingly broad and generalised labels. As David Mearns puts it:

The national political structure is built on a set of contrasted categories which seek to emphasize differences. However, the same system requires those differences to be suppressed at the level of organization below the most encompassing, categorical contrasts of Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others if it is to reproduce itself. (81)

The acceptance of these labels allows for a great deal of authoritative control over individual identities. Difference is officially allowed only within the broad categories constituted by the authorities; at this level, these categories are more easily controlled, and racial identities can be more effectively constrained within set limits.

In both Malaysia and Singapore, racial categorisation serves to construct identities which highlight inter-racial differences, while erasing intra-racial differences. The insistence on racial classification has naturally led to increased ethnification in both countries, as individuals see it as ‘natural’ to identify themselves by race. Tan Chee Beng points out that in Malaysia, “in the process of nation-building, each ethnic group has emphasised its own ethnic identity more and more” (155). In the case of Singapore, Geoffrey Benjamin notes that: “The constant reiteration of the C-M-I-Eurasian categorization […] puts considerable pressure on people to see themselves as ethnically defined” (72 – 3). Shamsul refines this theme, asserting that this increase in ethnification represents defiance of authoritative schemes: “‘difference’ as a defining mode of everyday existence, as opposed to the top-down ‘homogenising schemes’,
dominated the mind and practical life of the populace" (23). Shamsul suggests that despite the homogenisation of the population into three broadly-defined categories and the apparent general acceptance of these categories, at the grassroots level there is a strong consciousness of difference and heterogeneity, both across and within these categories. The state’s insistence on the constant reiteration of inter-racial difference has led to a greater awareness of, as well as individual insistence on, intra-racial difference. However, if the state were to recognise these minute differences, it would have to admit racially and culturally hybrid identities, which would undermine the nation-building project, both in Malaysia and Singapore.

This focus on ‘purity’ is also evident in the official treatment of culture in Malaysia and Singapore. In his 1978 National Day Rally Speech, Lee Kuan Yew spoke about the dangers of deculturisation (losing one’s ‘real’ culture and replacing it with another), stating that anyone who suffers this process will experience “a sense of deprivation” because of the loss of ‘purity’ (qtd. in Clammer, “Culture, Values” 502). Clammer challenges this view, asking why someone “can be bilingual or multilingual, but not bicultural or multicultural” (“Culture, Values” 509). This is a pertinent question as it can easily be argued that Singaporeans partake of a very mixed cultural heritage which asserts itself in matters of dress, language, and cuisine. But in Singapore, culture officially remains a factor of race, and race remains a fixed, essential category. One cannot claim a multicultural heritage because, officially, such a thing cannot exist. Indeed, Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have suggested that for Singapore, “hybridity is anathema because it signals a lack of identity” (83). In the National Day Rally Speech quoted above, Lee asserts that, despite the fact that he uses “Western concepts, Western words,” he will nonetheless remain purely Eastern because “mine is an Eastern value system” (qtd. in Clammer, “Culture, Values” 502). He does not admit the possibility of a mixing of East and West, but maintains that in some fundamental way, he remains ‘purely’ Eastern. Similarly, instead of allowing the development of a naturally-developing hybrid Singaporean culture, the state demands that each individual claim a particular ‘pure’ culture based on race: “Culture’ as an object of public discussion in Singapore almost always means a traditional, ethnically delimited culture, a Golden Age to which each ‘race’ can look back separately for inspiration” (Benjamin 72).
In Malaysia there is a similar harking back to the "Golden Age" of culture, with the same emphasis on culture as it was practised in the original homeland. However, there are further complications in Malaysia, because the nation is claimed in the name of the Malays. Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of Malaysia, and Islam (to which all Malays subscribe) is the official religion. The Malaysian concept of national culture, as set down in Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (Basis of the National Culture) also privileges Malay and Islamic culture:

i. Malaysia's national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the people of this region.

ii. Elements of other cultures which are suitable and appropriate can be incorporated into the national culture.

iii. Islam is an important element in the formation of the national culture.

(Hassan vii)\(^\text{10}\)

There is, therefore, a specific, albeit somewhat vague, idea of what constitutes a national culture. However, what is important in the context of this discussion is the idea of what does not constitute national culture. Indian, Chinese and European cultures might be deliberately incorporated, but only if deemed "appropriate," and only if they can be accommodated within the Islamic framework. Thus even where a level of cultural hybridity is tentatively allowed, it is severely restricted by demands that it fit into an already existing framework.

It is clear that at an authoritative level, hybridity cannot be seen to exist in Malaysia and Singapore. It must be disciplined into singular, state-created categories. Ang and Stratton point out that:

What drives Singaporean national cultural policy, then, is the desire to eradicate 'cultural contamination' which is seen as a key threat to the creation of a viable national identity. This represents a fear of the processes of hybridization which

\(^{10}\) The translation is mine. The original text is as follows:

i. Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Malaysia haruslah berasaskan kebudayaan asli rakyat rantau ini.

ii. Unsur-unsur kebudayaan lain yang sesuai dan wajar boleh diterima menjadi unsur kebudayaan kebangsaan.
expose and emphasize the necessarily impure, unoriginal, mixed, and provisional nature of all identities emerging and proliferating within the boundaries of Singaporean national space. (82)

Such "contamination" can only be avoided if there is constant reiteration of 'pure,' monolithic racial categories. Farish Noor suggests that something similar happens in the context of Malaysia:

What strikes me as very sad, so many people (not just Muslims), still hold onto this idea of identity being something pure and uncontaminated [...].

People are looking for homelands. The Indian community feels marginalised, isolated, and thinks of India as its home land. Chinese, with the demise of the baba culture, go for mainstream Chinese culture. Likewise for the Malays here, they feel they have to invent a home land, which is this mythical, pure, Malay, Muslim class which never existed. ("Malaysians" 14)

It is ironic that in the process of attempting to build a nation, the authorities in Malaysia and Singapore have in fact created a situation in which some of their citizens find themselves asking serious questions about where they belong – to their current or original homelands. Purushotam has expressed her sense of ambiguous identity, reflecting this uncertainty:

The strict and enclosed meaning given to origin denies tracing place and space in terms of actual birth-place. Thus, in my terms, my birth-place, my homeland, my origins are in Singapore. The procedures by which I am racially classified, even today, trace my origins to India. It has me locked to one single place in a map designed in colonial times. In an important sense, this ensures my status as a sojourner: there is the potential uneasiness as to where home really is. ("Disciplining" 86)

The insistence on purity has created borders which sometimes bar individuals from fully participating in the lives of their countries. Jacqueline Lo, reminds us, however, that "we are not helpless objects formed and moved by power, but rather capable of

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iii. Islam menjadi unsur yang penting dalam pembentukan kebudayaan kebangsaan itu.
resisting the power of disciplinary forces and institutional discourses” (Staging Nation 7).

Why English-language Theatre?

PuruShotam’s words encompass not only a philosophical and psychological level, but also a spatial and temporal level. How long does it take, for example, for an individual to ‘belong’ to a particular place? When do a person’s roots in another place cease to be relevant? PuruShotam and many Malaysians and Singaporeans like her are sometimes unsure “as to where home really is,” because the state insists on constructing them as belonging to a specific space which is geographically and emotionally distant from the space they actually inhabit. Individuals inhabit two spaces, the private and the public. The private space is generally organically hybrid, rooted in the current home, while the public space, constructed by the state, demands that the individual remain rooted in the original homeland. The private space corresponds to the constitution of alternative identities by individuals, while the public space is anchored by the imposition of monolithic, state-constructed identities.

However, the stand-off between these two positions is never purely oppositional. As has been discussed, there can be no wholly original creation of identity, as any individual expression arises from what has already been constructed. Certainly, individual challenges to inscribed identities can only work within the borders of that constituted identity, and within the borders of society and its rules. This does not, however, mean that individuals are doomed to fixity, as there is always some room in which to manoeuvre. As Butler points out: “Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretation within the confines of already existing directives” (“Performative” 277). Thus, any negotiation between private and public spaces is a matter of reinterpretation and reconfiguration, rather than of wholesale creation. It is dialogic rather than polemical.

The theatre provides a space where such dialogue between the public and the private, the individual and the authoritative, can take place. A performative is effective only if it is accepted as being effective, that is, if society accedes to the authority
imposed by the performative utterance. It is, therefore, necessary for performative utterances or actions to be in some measure public; authoritative constructs, for example, are public in that the state promulgates them for society as a whole. The English-language theatre can in some ways be considered a private space, as it is not wholly regulated by the authorities; but at the same time, when an audience is gathered, it is also clearly a public space. It thus represents a public and embodied forum for the expression of individual ideas that are (relatively) unmediated by authority. All public performances in Malaysia and Singapore must be licensed by the police; yet the theatre remains, despite the best efforts of the authorities in both countries, comparatively unregulated. Licensing authorities in Malaysia and Singapore attempt to create precise borders within which the theatre should function. However, since licenses are granted on the basis of printed scripts, only the written word can be strictly policed, and this allows theatre practitioners a surprising degree of latitude. Loh and Kahn have noted the prevalence of challenge and contestation in the field of performing arts in Malaysia; not all performances follow the precepts of the National Cultural Policy ("Introduction" 14). The National Cultural Policy of Malaysia attempts to fix the trajectory of development of Malaysia’s national culture, demanding that it develop along particular lines. As Loh and Kahn point out, however, there is a plethora of cultural activity which deviates from what is prescribed, and it is open to public view. This activity undermines official performative constructs. The theatre also combines psychological, spatial and temporal levels, and is thus capable of embodying these issues in a real and immediate way. It represents a public and embodied forum for the expression of ideas that are private, relatively unmediated by authority.

Once considered the under-performing stepchild in the family of literary and performing arts, theatre has now established itself, in both Malaysia and Singapore, as a particularly vibrant, lively, and rapidly developing site of expression. The ability of the theatre to communicate in a variety of ways which are not easily regulated (through, for example, the use made of physical bodies) allows for the creation of a space of individual expression, accessible to the public, in which the social borders and divisions commonly adhered to can be transgressed and violated in creative and challenging ways. However it also works within the borders of its society. Theatre in

11 For a fuller discussion of censorship and state intervention in theatre, see chapter two.
Malaysia and Singapore does not generally, for example, discard the question of race or try to function as if it does not pose problems, as that would be untrue of Malaysian and Singaporean society. However, it probes, questions and challenges the issue through themes addressed, language used, the use of the actors' bodies, and so on. Lo sees the theatre as a site of active agency: "'Doing' theatre entails more than producing a reflection of society; rather, the act of re-presentation assumes the potential for commentary on and intervention in the ideological reproduction of the nation and its subjects" (Staging Nation 2). Theatre, therefore, provides fertile and compelling ground from which to study the constitution of identities in Malaysia and Singapore.

Why, however, the focus on the English language? Do theatres in other languages not offer the same dialogic spaces? English occupies an interesting position in both Malaysia and Singapore. In Malaysia, "it has been Federal Government policy to support the growth and institutionalization of the Malay language (bahasa Malaysia), and concomitantly the literature written in it, to give support to the creation of a common political culture among Malaysians" (Tham, "Politics" 217). In practice what has happened is that official support goes not only to works written in Malay, but by Malays. Theoretically a work written in Malay by a Malaysian writer of any ethnic background could be included in the corpus of national literature. In practice, however, Bahasa Malaysia is seen (at least in the field of literature) as the language of the Malays; it is, therefore, no surprise that most non-Malay writers choose to write in either their mother-tongues or in English. There is a strong element of politicisation here, with non Malay-language literatures pushed to the margins as 'sectional' (that is, communal) literatures, and Malay-language literature touted as the national literature. However, as Tham points out: "Strictly speaking, Malay writers are not national writers because their inclinations both in scope and ideas do not reflect the totality of Malaysian society" ("Politics" 228). This is undoubtedly also true of literatures written by non-Malays; ethnic and cultural division being so deeply entrenched, few writers have the ability to deal competently with cross-cultural frames of reference.

Can English possibly cross these entrenched positions? In Malaysia, the use of English is problematic. Since Malaysia is officially constructed as a Malay country, the widespread use of Bahasa Malaysia not only as the official language, but also as the
common language of communication, is a point of considerable nationalist pride. To habitually use English could, therefore, be taken as a sign of a lack of commitment to the nation. However, there is no official proscription against writing in English.

English could potentially cut across barriers of race and culture, as it does not belong to any particular racial group in Malaysia. However, one major problem is that over the past thirty years, it has become something of a minority language. In the early 1970s, the education policy changed, with Malay becoming the official language of education throughout the country. An entire generation has now grown up with Malay as its first language. Although officially taught at schools as a second language, English lags very far behind. It is readily accessible only to the elite: educated, urban middle- to upper middle-class Malaysians who can afford private or overseas educations for their children, or who habitually speak English at home.

Because it has in effect become a foreign language, it is possible that “each of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia would find literature written in English extremely difficult to accommodate because of its lack of cultural or emotional affiliation” (Tham, “Politics” 234). However, English still has the potential to break down borders within class lines. Division and stratification in urban Malaysia are generally along class rather than ethnic lines: an educated middle-class Indian doctor, for example, would find more in common with a Malay or Chinese person in similar circumstances than with an uneducated Indian estate labourer. It is among these educated urban groups that English functions as a lingua franca. Literature written in English, therefore, does have boundary-transgressing, intentionally hybrid qualities, but only up to a certain point. In Malaysia, it remains an urban middle-class phenomenon, both in production and consumption.

In Singapore, the use of English is less problematic. Although Malay is officially the national language, it is barely used except by the Malays. Mandarin and Tamil are also recognised as official languages, and all three languages are in theory treated as ‘separate but equal.’ However, English is the language of education and of everyday communication. Attempts to create national literature are open to members of all races, and English has been largely accepted as a useful and neutral linguistic vehicle for the expression of literary thought. Lee Kuan Yew, for example, noted in
1960 that "the product of the University of Malaya [in Singapore] is likely to approximate to the ultimate norm of the true Malayan" as the ranks of the English-educated cut across ethnic and communal cultural lines through a common language, English" (qtd. in T. A. Koh, "Singapore Writing" 163). In Singapore, where education is in English and command of the language is seen as necessary to maintain worldwide economic ties, it functions as a common language, with less cultural baggage attached to it than in Malaysia.

The problem faced by Singaporean writers is that bogey of the People’s Action Party (PAP) government: liberal democracy and rampant Westernisation. Singaporean national and cultural ideology seeks to officially eschew Western influence as being negative, destructive, symbolic of a decaying civilisation, and directly at odds with the vigorous, healthy, ‘Asian’ civilisation represented by Singapore. But the Western influence, a result not only of colonialism but also of current globalising trends, is an undeniable part of Singapore’s circumstances. It is undoubtedly the most Westernised of the countries of Southeast Asia. And as Koh Tai Ann points out, “much of this [local] work has a local identity precisely because it was produced out of local circumstances of which the Western heritage is an important, though not the only important, component element” ("Singapore Writing" 167).

In both countries, it can be said that, currently, only the literature written in English has the potential to cut across ethnic and cultural borders. Works written in Indian or Chinese languages, for example, would appeal only to narrow audiences with specific linguistic competence. Malay literature could (in Malaysia) be understood across a much broader spectrum, but is currently too closely associated with Malay culture and ethnicity to hold wide appeal. While Bahasa Malaysia is now the language of everyday inter-ethnic communication in Malaysia, in a literary context the use of Bahasa Malaysia is a battlefield riddled with cultural and political landmines.

English-language writing is the preserve of people who might be seen as occupying an ‘in-between’ position, and who therefore question imposed racial and cultural identities. They might not be comfortable with the official languages linked to their official races, and are therefore less sanguine about the cultural roots assigned to them by public policy. Does my own inability to speak an Indian language, for
example, make me less Indian? Can I, or do I even need to, call myself an Indian at all? Perhaps I should be called a Malayali Malaysian rather than (as is current) a Malaysian Indian. But the official schema cannot accommodate that category, and so I must continue as an official Indian, whose language of choice is English. English is, for cultural hybrids such as myself who acknowledge their hybridity, the only option which allows access into that hybridity. Officially named mother-tongues lock us into arbitrary and rigidly-defined boxes. Using English allows a bridge for crossing between officially bounded categories. The English language, then, adds another dimension to the dialogic qualities of theatre previously discussed, allowing for border-crossings which would be difficult or impossible with other languages.

**Thesis Structure**

This thesis will consist of five chapters as well as the introduction and conclusion. Chapter one will deal with the construction of a national identity, dealing specifically with plays written soon after the gaining of independence, or which focus on the immediate post-Independence period. Chapter two also deals with the constitution of a national identity, but looked at more critically, several decades after independence. The plays studied here incorporate a high degree of critical political comment on the state of the nation, but this critique is presented allegorically. Why is the subterfuge necessary?

Chapter three moves away from the contemplation of wider themes of national identity and looks instead at the tension between public (official) and private (individual) identities. The plays studied here examine the narrow personal spaces allowed the individual, who is hemmed in by officially constituted identities. This idea is further viewed through the lens of gender, as the main characters are also influenced, perhaps trapped, by their construction as women of particular races and classes.

Chapter four also deals with the tension between the narrow psychic spaces of official identity construction, and the potentially wider spaces afforded by individual constitution of identity. The focus here will be on gender and sexual identities, with the playwrights challenging traditional Asian concepts of appropriate gender roles.
Chapter five looks outward again, focusing on the crossing and merging of national and international boundaries through the intercultural work of Singapore’s TheatreWorks and Malaysia’s Five Arts Centre. The focus is on the construction of border-crossing identities, whether transnational or intra-national.

In choosing the plays on which this thesis will focus, I have decided on a series of texts which demonstrate the development of Malaysian and Singaporean theatre from the immediate post-Independence period to more current times. This selection gives some idea not only of the progress in English-language theatre writing and staging, but also of the increasingly confident expression of an organically hybrid Malaysian or Singaporean identity. In the plays discussed in chapter one, for example, essentialist conceptions of race are either taken as read (see, for example, Robert Yeo’s response to the Indian character, Reggie, in his *Singapore Trilogy*), or are ‘overcome’ by the words of the characters (as in Lee Joo For’s *The Happening in the Bungalow*, where a character blithely declares that racial and cultural differences do not matter when two individuals love each other). More realistic is Edward Dorall’s *A Tiger is Loose in Our Community*, in which a utopian vision of racial harmony is destroyed by the dystopian fact of racial distrust. The play most positive in its outlook is K. Das’s *Lela Mayang*, whose storyline focuses entirely on the Malay community (reflecting the official position of racial division), while its staging suggests multiracial cooperation and harmony (hinting at the possibilities inherent in an acceptance of hybridity). However, all these plays do to some extent centralise race and ask how to ‘overcome’ racial division.

In later plays, the question of race is either subordinated to other themes, or is treated with greater subtlety and complexity. Chapter two, for instance, discusses plays in which race is not foregrounded at all. Kee Thuan Chye’s *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* concentrates mainly on Malay characters, but this is in keeping with the setting of the play within the aristocratic circles of the nineteenth century. When the play brings in some twentieth-century Malaysians, they appear as a racially-mixed group, mixing easily; the issue of race is, for this group, a non-issue. In Kuo Pao Kun’s *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, it is virtually impossible to assign either race or gender to any of the characters; it is more important to be able to identify them as
Singaporeans. Chapter three does deal with issues of race, but looks at them within a wider social context – how does being considered to be of a certain race trap an individual within a particular social space? To what extent is the individual complicit in this entrapment? Interestingly, neither playwright discussed here suggests the possibility of escaping from or overcoming racial inscriptions. Does this suggest that they have recognised it as inescapable? The movement from chapter one to chapter three traces a change in agenda, so to speak, with Malaysians and Singaporeans becoming less concerned with overcoming racial division, and more concerned with learning how to live with it as an inescapable fact of life within the fabric of the nation. There is clearly a loss, in the later plays, of the heady optimism which marks the earlier plays. The plays discussed in chapter three also question gender construction, a point which will be dealt with in greater detail in chapter four. Neither of the plays in chapter four foregrounds race, except insofar as it has cultural repercussions on the construction of gender identities. It is possible to see the problems discussed in these plays as having relevance to a wide audience, regardless of race or gender. The final chapter also traces attempts to move beyond racial categorisation, as the plays and theatre companies under discussion focus on intercultural performances which highlight the possibilities inherent in intentional cultural hybridity while trying not to privilege any particular race or culture. The development in themes from the first to the last chapter suggests the possibility of the development of the Malaysian and Singaporean identity beyond mere divisive questions of race.

While overall there is some sense of chronological development, the discussion of the plays is not strictly chronological. Instead, I have chosen to structure the chapters by thematic connections, which have been outlined above. Generally, what the chapters will trace is the development of theatre writing and staging in Malaysia and Singapore from tentative and imitative beginnings to the current level of innovation and confidence, with theatre expressing a more independent and provocative stance. By examining theatre through the lens of performativity and identity construction, I intend also to look at the slow growth of a Malaysian and Singaporean identity which, while it grapples with the inescapable question of race, also reconfigures that question into new and thought-provoking forms, challenging the essentialising hegemony of the state.
Chapter One

Re-imagining Communities: The Singapore Trilogy and New Drama One

Malaysia has been an independent state since 1957, while Singapore’s statehood dates back to 1965. But if we read ‘state’ as a purely geo-political arrangement of boundary-lines and ‘nation’ as a construct that demands emotional and spiritual involvement, then the attitudes of Singaporeans I have met, as well as of fellow Malaysians, makes me doubt whether either state exists as a nation. When I embarked on my Ph.D. in Australia, many of my acquaintances assumed that this was a prelude to eventual migration. My response surprised many: I did not want to migrate, I explained, firstly because I happen to like Malaysia, and secondly because, in my peripatetic life as an Embassy brat, Malaysia was the only country I had lived in, in which I felt completely at home. I had come to this home late and yet it quickly came to feel like a place to which I belonged not just as a citizen, by right of jus soli,1 but spiritually and culturally; it was a country which because of its hybridity, its delicate manoeuvrings between East and West, could and did accommodate my own confused East-West hybridity.

However, while this hybrid identity is available to me in a purely personal search for identity, official definitions of identity deny it absolutely. Does the state’s heavy-handed, interventionist approach lead to a lack of natural, affective ties between individual and nation? In Malaysia, the development of the national identity has been guided along a particular path, as it has in Singapore, with considerable government intervention (Mutalib 89). In both cases the reluctance to leave the formation of a common identity to natural development is motivated by the certainty that such an identity would be hybrid and therefore threatening to the constitution of racially ‘pure’ national identities which, as discussed in the introduction, serve to maintain political hegemony.

In 1967, Singaporean Minister Goh Keng Swee described Singapore as “a complex, multiracial community with little sense of common history, with a group

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1 One of the agreements made in the run-up to Independence for Malaysia was that non-Malays born in Malaya be given citizenship by right of birth, that is, jus soli.
purpose which is yet to be properly articulated. We are in the process of rapid transition towards a destiny which we do not yet know" (qtd. in Chew 363). This same phrase could, ten years earlier, have applied to newly-independent Malaysia as well. In both cases, precisely in order to give the countries some guidance, narrowly-defined nation-building policies were put in place. Did these policies successfully engender a national identity or a sense of close identification with the nation? Or have they merely created an 'official' national identity which does not necessarily reflect the common experience of most of the populace? Most importantly, does the insistence on official interpretations of nationhood, and the resultant marginalisation of other approaches, in fact undermine the potential of the populace to invest emotionally in the nation? In this chapter, I will look at how playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s negotiated the tension between authoritative and demotic definitions of nationhood and national identity, seeking to voice their own desires and experiences. The plays to be studied in this chapter reflect private responses to the interventionist character of the state, and the intrusive programs put in place by it after independence. They are imbued with a mix of optimism (inspired by the youth and energy of both nations) and pessimism (brought on by the awareness of the violence and discord latent in both societies, and the heavy-handedness of the authorities). There is an underlying sense of powerlessness before authority which undermines the hopeful sense of exploration. Ultimately, despite the subversive and innovative work of the writers, the status quo remains.

Anne Brewster, discussing the construction of national identities, notes that: "It is not necessarily the characteristics themselves of so-called national identities that are of interest here, but the process of selection by which these identities are constructed" (136). By studying these plays, we will be able to compare and contrast the authoritative and demotic processes of selection which have occurred in the process of building Malaysia and Singapore into nations. What has the state selected as being central to the formation of the national identity, and what have individuals favoured as a means of defining their own national identities?

National identity was performatively constituted by both states in a bid to balance and pacify a restive multiracial population. Race is central to the construction of nation as, by basing national identity in large part on racial identity, the authorities
are able to give the national identity a sense of historicity, of primordiality, as well as
drawing those lines which allow the individual to define his or her membership within
a particular group while identifying all others as not belonging to that group. However,
as both states are young, the sutures are still visible in the constructions of Malaysian
and Singaporean identities, and this allows the playwrights under consideration here
the opportunity to pick apart the stitches and attempt to re-construct the pattern into
something more acceptable to them. Thus where official discourse asserts racial and
cultural purity or political hegemony, these plays experiment with hybridity, cross-
cultural performance vocabularies, and oppositional politics.

The plays to be examined are Singaporean writer Robert Yeo’s *The Singapore
Trilogy*, consisting of *Are You There, Singapore? (AYT)*, *One Year Back Home (One
Year)* and *Changi*; and three plays from Malaysia, namely *Lela Mayang (Lela)* by K.
Das, *A Tiger is Loose in Our Community (Tiger)* by Edward Dorall, and Lee Joo For’s
*The Happening in the Bungalow (Happening)*. *AYT* was written in 1969 and performed
in 1974 at the Cultural Centre of the University of Singapore, by the University of
Singapore Society, with Prem Kumar directing. *One Year*, written in 1977, was first
performed in 1980 at the DBS Auditorium; Max Le Blond directed the University of
Singapore Society production. It was restaged in 1990 at The Black Box as part of the
TheatreWorks Festival of Singapore plays, directed by Lim Yu Beng. *Changi*, written
in 1994, was staged at the National Institute of Education’s Raffles Studio Theatre in
1997, with Elangovan directing. In 2003 it was staged in Kuala Lumpur and Penang.
While the writing of these plays was spread over twenty-five years, the events of the
trilogy span only eight years, from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s.

The three Malaysian plays were written over a much shorter period: Dorall’s in
1967, Das’s in 1968 and Lee’s in 1970. *Tiger* was staged at Kuala Lumpur’s Town Hall
in 1967 by the Victoria Institution Cultural Society, and later staged by Kolej Tuanku
Ja’afar at the British Council Hall, Kuala Lumpur, in 1995, with Tim Evans directing.
*Lela*, directed by Syed Alwi, was performed at the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall in 1968
by the Malaysia Arts Theatre Group (MATG), while the Kilat Players staged
*Happening* at the University Experimental Theatre in 1970, with N. Raghavan
directing.
Although the Singaporean and Malaysian plays are not contemporaneous in terms of when they were written, all the plays under consideration deal with analogous times in the histories of their respective countries: both Malaysia and Singapore had recently become independent, and these plays represent writers trying to come to terms with and find voices for their fledgling identities. It is, therefore, germane to ask the same question which must have exercised leaders and writers of that time: what is a nation? And, more specifically, what is our nation?

What is a nation?

Theorists focus on the basic idea of nation as a community unified around some commonly-held concept or principle, while nationalism is the fellow-feeling or sense of community derived from this concept or principle. Ernest Gellner, for example, defines nationalism as “a political principle which maintains that similarity of culture is the basic social bond” (3). Ernest Renan states that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (11), such as political feuds which may have divided their ancestors long ago, or massacres which affected one particular tribe. In Renan’s view, it is the things held in common which make a nation; a constant emphasis on difference might allow a state to exist, but never a nation.

Renan’s formulation of a nation as being based in forgetfulness implies that it is a mental or intellectual construct rather than an inarguable ‘fact’ or essence – an opinion shared by both Gellner and Benedict Anderson. Anderson quotes Gellner’s view that: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (6); Anderson’s definition posits the nation as “an imagined political community”. He states that: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members […]. [Y]et in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Anderson’s argument amplifies Renan’s and Gellner’s definitions of nation as a largely mental construct in which a fair degree of forgetfulness must have occurred in the process of finding common ground.
And yet at the same time, nations are based on a tenacious holding on to the past, that is, a refusal to forget. Anderson distinguishes between "nation-states" (political constructs, with their borders recently decided upon) and "nations," which are the ancient cultural roots from which the nation-state sprang: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past" (11). In much the same way that gendered signs and gestures are assumed to be an outward expression of inward essence, the nation-state is taken to be a defined political statement of something which has 'always' existed. Thus, the political construct is normalised within everyday discourse as something 'natural' and 'unchosen.' Lo, however, reaffirms the sense of nationalism as constructed, that is, unnatural:

In other words, nationalism as myth works to efface the traces of its own determinate historical production by re-presenting the nation as a transcendental subject [...]. Historical, cultural and ethnographical continuity is often fabricated to support political dominance whilst new symbols of the nation such as the flag and the anthem, are created to facilitate the process of identification. ("Myths" 5)

As Timothy Brennan states, again pointing to the basic nature of nation as a construct: "The 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation' – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure" (4).

Brennan's definition is reminiscent of Anderson's view that "so often in the 'nation-building' policies of the new states one sees [...] a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth" (113 – 114). This representation of the nation positions it as purely politically constituted. However, this can never be the whole story of the nation. Most theorists assert the need for emotional linkage between individual and state, if that state is to function as a nation; Anderson, for example, writes of "the attachment that peoples feel for the inventions of their imagination," stating that "people are ready to die for these inventions" (141). Renan makes a similar point: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle [...]. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; [...] these are the essential
conditions for being a people” (19). Renan’s focus in this essay is on his native France. Can his words have a similar level of relevance to multiracial countries such as Malaysia and Singapore which, rather than developing organically into nations over a long period of time, and then politically into nation-states, were created within living memory, by political fiat, and which insist on underlining rather than forgetting racial difference? Where are the common legacy, the long and glorious past, which are “the essential conditions for being a people?”

The leaders of Malaysia and Singapore have long evinced uncertainty about the nation-ness of their countries. In 1999, then-Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong stated unequivocally that “Singapore is not yet a nation. It is only a state, a sovereign entity;” he went on to assert that the country would “last the next 100 years” only if “the different races can gel as one people, feel as one people and pulsate with the same Singapore heartbeat” (“Singapore Tribe” 1). His proviso on the future existence of Singapore implies that as yet, there is no sense of Singapore as one people. As Shamsul notes, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad admits that there is still no “united Malaysian nation” (25 - 26). Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, then Deputy Prime Minister, in 2000 asserted that it would one day be possible to “define a Bangsa Malaysia or Malaysian Nation in the years to come” (qtd. in Cheah 70). What all these comments underline is that in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, the nation has yet to be achieved; it is something to be looked forward to, part of an unspecified future. However, what both countries have to contend with on this journey towards nationhood is historical, post-independence constructions of the nation which, with their emphasis on communalism and differential privilege, now hamper the desire to forge a nation united in and by a more hybrid identity.

As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, in Malaysia and Singapore hybridity threatens the way in which both nations have been constituted; authoritatively-constituted national identity, with its insistence on racial and cultural purity, ironically militates against the development of an overarching, non-communal identity: “Its cultural impurity poses a problem to the idea of the nation-state and the desirability of pure, unified and homogeneous national cultures [...]. This explains why in its internal political rhetoric, race and culture are presented, in the official policy of
multiracialism, in essentialist terms” (Lian 49 – 50). Although referring to Singapore, this comment is equally valid for the situation in Malaysia.

Yet despite the insistence on racial difference, and the dominance of one race, there is some evidence that the overarching national identity does exist. Mutalib notes that: “As early as 1970, a national survey concluded that ‘nine-tenths of the respondents identify themselves as Singaporeans rather than as Chinese, Malay or Indian’” (79). It is perhaps a tenuous identity at best, easily overcome by appeals to racial or communal interests. But it has developed, in both countries, despite official constructions of national identity as diverse and racially based. Pondering the question of why some countries united by a single language do not form nations, while some polyglot countries such as Switzerland do, Renan puts it down to the “will of Switzerland to be united, in spite of the diversity of her dialects” (18). I would suggest that in Malaysia and Singapore, there is a similar underlying will among the people to be seen and to function as one people, that is, to become a nation. This latent desire is visible in the six plays under consideration in this chapter.

**The Writer as Narrator of Nation**

Anderson has noted the ability of the novel to give, through narration, a certain solidity to the intangible idea of nation. He explains that the narrative does not produce the idea of nation as such. Rather, it concretises the idea that the individuals reading the narrative are part of a group, all being simultaneously addressed, and all assumed to share familiarity with what is being narrated (27 – 28). The narrative thus solidifies the sense of community.

The national narrative can be written from at least two perspectives: the expressive perspective of the individual writing of his or her own experience, or the pedagogic perspective of the state as it seeks to impose its hegemonic view. Bhabha expands on this, suggesting that both these restrictive approaches “are valuable in drawing our attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new ‘ethnicities’, new social movements, ‘the politics of difference’” (“Introduction” 3). In Malaysia and
Singapore the state focused on race and culture, demanding that its citizens look back to memories drawn from the original homeland. Among writers in the English language, however – by definition individuals who are uncomfortable with essentialist groupings of race and culture – there was a tendency to focus on “alternative constituencies:” racially hybrid identities, politically oppositional stances, cultural syncretism. The writers discussed here challenge the monocular, essentialist stance of the authorities.

As noted by Brewster: “Writers bear witness to the plurality of voices in any one society and, especially in a society of rapid economic and social change, give the lie to hegemonic nationalism by highlighting its omissions and contradictions” (137). Malaysian political and cultural commentator Farish A. Noor, writing in 2002, makes a relevant point when he says that: “The national narrative of any country has to aim towards mirroring the diversity within it, not to simply allocate slots for communities, shoving some of the lesser-privileged ones to the subaltern category of the exotic Other” (Other Malaysia 165). Although he writes in the context of twenty-first century Malaysia, the comment is germane to Malaysia and Singapore in the 1960s. Ideally the national narrative should mirror society, rather than requiring that society conform to the narrative. In Malaysia and Singapore, however, the preference of the authorities is that the national narrative give voice to and normalise state policy. Thus if the national narrative insists on the imposition of particular constructed identities, any challenge to or interrogation of that identity must come from private narratives.

Shamsul makes an interesting point, with reference to the difference between national and private narratives: private narratives are considered “personal” and “subjective,” and therefore “unrepresentative” of the empirical reality.” Hence they are rejected as “a valid source of information,” and subaltern voices are thus repressed (19 – 20). This stance means that the everyday experience recorded in private narrative is dismissed as a source of information about reality at a national level. Yet surely it is these everyday, individual lives which collectively work towards forming a national consciousness. In the eyes of the authorities, however, individual lives and subjective private narratives are too fluid, slipping over rigidly-defined boundaries of race and
culpature. Private narratives stand on the threshold, on the verge of crossing into different spaces.

The writings in this chapter are considered private, but all have a ‘public’ commitment, that is, highlighting the “omissions and contradictions” of hegemonic nationalism (Brewster 137). Yeo, for example, contests the absolute hegemony of the People’s Action Pary (PAP) over the formation of the national identity. He highlights the powerlessness of the individual, dissenting voice. The Malaysian playwrights interrogate not the political but the cultural hegemony imposed on them. They do not, however, overtly oppose this identity; rather, what we see in the three Malaysian plays are various attempts to interrogate cultural hegemony by reflecting a more heterogeneous society. The explorations and interrogations examined in this chapter are hesitant and tentative at best. Having existed as independent nations for relatively short periods, both Malaysia and Singapore were still groping towards an identity, at both the public and private levels.

Constructing a Reluctant Nation: The Singapore Trilogy

The English-language drama produced in the immediate post-independence phases in the Federated States of Malaya, as well as in Malaysia and Singapore, had a distinct “post-colonial agenda” (Seet and Sankaran 9). Writers in the early 1960s sought to move English-language theatre in Singapore away from the heavily Western-oriented practice of expatriate-dominated theatre clubs. The solution was not just to place the management of these clubs into local hands, but also to produce local plays using local talent. Early attempts at drama did not spark much of a following and in 1966, local Singaporean theatre went into a decline from which it recovered briefly only in 1974, with the staging of Yeo’s Are You There, Singapore? (AYT). Seet suggests that one of the reasons for this decline, indeed for the general lack of development and progress in theatre, was the fact that “the medium of playwriting had been the recourse of a heterogeneous group […] who seemed to compose in an artistic vacuum unaware of one another’s contributions and repeating rather than learning from the mistakes of their predecessors” (“Singapore Drama” 85). A community of theatre practitioners had not yet been established, in much the same way, perhaps, that the imagined community of the nation itself could be seen as still emergent. Another
problem was language; dialogue tended to be stilted and inauthentic, with most writers viewing non-standard English as being unacceptable as dramatic idiom. Most Singaporeans who were able to write plays in English had been educated by the colonial British, and therefore felt uncomfortable with the more colloquial forms of English indigenous to Singapore. Ironically, although desirous of escaping from colonialist modes of thought, they found themselves to some extent still shackled by them.

By the time Yeo wrote *A YT*, however, those shackles had loosened considerably. Yeo’s play represents a signal advance, in terms of language, theme and characterisation, over the other plays of the 1960s. Not only does it take the existence of a Singaporean identity more for granted, it also begins to question the development of that identity by the state. Yeo becomes increasingly critical as the trilogy progresses, reflecting an increasing confidence in the stability of the state and the growth of the nation. When he wrote *A YT* in 1969, Singapore as a nation still needed to be built up and helped along, but in 1994, when *Changi* was written, Singapore’s existence as a nation was far more secure, and Yeo could critically interrogate issues of construction of identity and the interpellation of individuals into state discourse. Catherine Diamond asserts that Yeo’s plays “analyze and explore the unique relationship between the individual’s maturation and the development of the state itself in the particular turmoil of an evolving Singaporean identity” (126). Diamond suggests that the trilogy traces the growth of Singapore’s identity as a nation, that is, the move from politically constituted state to emotionally affective nation. I will argue that here, the maturation of the individual in fact outstrips the state’s development into nation; as the trilogy progresses, we see Siew Chye, a central character, grow from an unquestioning stalwart of the PAP to a more reflective, humane person who is willing to question and challenge the received dogma of his political party. Throughout the three plays, however, the PAP is figured as unyielding and sternly paternalistic. Chye’s development into a warmer and more human character, therefore, is independent of direct state intervention.² Thus Yeo hints at the tension between national identities as

² It is worth noting that, although Yeo depicts the PAP as unchanging, state response to the staging of his plays actually indicates some loosening of attitudes, a point I will touch on later in this chapter.
mandated by the state, and alternative expressions of nation-ness as explored by the individual.

Yeo has asserted that his trilogy is "a fusion of the personal and the public" ("Coming Home"). This suggests that the private and the political are intimately linked, despite the desire of the PAP to keep politics largely out of the hands and lives of the people. As noted earlier, some issues which are of primary importance to individuals (such as assigning of racial labels) have been depoliticised by being removed from the arena of public discussion. As the nation has developed, however, there has been an increasing desire to speak up rather than to accept what is handed out by a dominant and paternalistic state. This is reflected in the movement of the trilogy, as will be explored in greater detail in the rest of this chapter: in *AYT* the personal and the political do not meet, seeming rather to run on parallel tracks, with the political dimension eventually getting derailed. In *One Year* Yeo uses the personal to comment on the political. In *Changi*, Yeo finally blends personal and political by creating for his characters crises of conscience which demand that they consider themselves not just as political animals (as occurred in *One Year*) but as human beings who might have to compromise their ideals in order to live as human beings. Politics develops from a mere parroting of ideals into an inextricable part of lived reality.

The focus on the nexus between political life and private life is vital to the consideration of the development of the Singapore identity because at an official level that identity is a carefully worked out political construct which takes little or no account of private constitutions of identity. Once independence was forced on them in 1965, the Singapore government worked to create an identity that would serve several purposes: it would have to bind the diverse population together, engendering some kind of emotional investment in the nation; and it would have to create the will to work hard, at considerable personal sacrifice, to ensure economic success. This amounts to the political creation of a social identity: Singaporeans were constructed as hardworking, thrifty, tolerant of others - all qualities vital to the survival of the country. Wilmott makes the interesting point that "in Singapore the state preceded the development of nationalism rather than emerging as its political consequence, and the state itself became the first major symbol of national identity" (581). The country was
presented as being small and defenceless, and therefore in need of the strong guiding hand of the government. This symbol of the vulnerable state inculcated compliance and submissiveness in the populace: they had to obey the voice of authority or the country would descend into chaos. Yeo interrogates this figuring of Singaporeans as needing to be led (and needing to follow obediently) with greater penetration in each play, moving from the unfocused, youthful *AYT* to the tougher and more politically as well as personally astute *Changi*.

The three plays reflect the realities of Singaporean politics, openly voicing political ideas considered dangerously anti-government. For this alone, Yeo should be commended. As Seet and Sankaran point out, he opened the way for the more radical playwrights of a later age such as Kuo Pao Kun and Tan Tarn How (13). Although ultimately the trilogy has a largely pro-PAP flavour, it also contains a subtle contestation of the official party line. Craig Latrell notes that: “For those interested in Singapore’s image of itself – particularly the nation’s cultural politics – *The Singapore Trilogy* is essential reading” (374). While Latrell is right in saying that these plays show us “Singapore’s image of itself,” it is not just the official image which is on display. Yeo’s subtle, muted interrogation of the official view allows a voice to emerge which, though soft and heavily disguised, nonetheless challenges governmental hegemony over the formation of a national identity.

*Are You There, Singapore?*

*AYT* has only been staged once; it is on the whole a poorly structured, static piece. It is wordy, with various characters declaiming long, polemical speeches as if from a soapbox. Characterisation is basic at best; director Prem Kumar states that the “people are types rather than individuals,” and Yeo admits this to be “one of his play’s flaws” (W.J. Tan). Interesting themes peter out, and the character identified by Yeo as being central is just dull. However, it is one of Yeo’s triumphs that, through subtle touches of language and cultural reference, he has created characters who are

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3 *One Year* was initially not granted a licence for public performance. Yeo gives an informative account of his struggle to obtain the licence in his interview with Ban Kah Choon, which is included in the published version of the trilogy.

4 Yeo clearly realises this; the character, Richard, disappears from *One Year* and only makes a cameo appearance in *Changi*. 
immediately identifiable as Singaporean. Earlier writers such as Goh Poh Seng and Lim Chor Pee had been unable to find an authentic voice for their working class characters, wavering between an unrealistically poetic idiom and an unconvincing attempt at recreating basilectal Singaporean English. Neither man was comfortable with the idiom, perhaps regarding it still as “non-pukka” (Seet, “Singapore Drama” 84). Yeo, however, has chosen to write about his own experiences and from within his own social class (W. J. Tan), resulting in a convincingly Singaporean language. Rajah and Tay note that the comfort of Yeo’s characters with colloquial English reflects the fact that “English had become more comfortably the language of many more Singaporeans who spoke it more in their own way, and less in the British Standard English way: in other words, English had become less of a second tongue” (404). This comment points to the hybrid quality of Singaporean English, which is a mixture of standard English and various borrowings (linguistic, grammatical and syntactical) from the main languages of Singapore. Like the evolving language, the evolving identity is also organically hybrid.

Yeo is aware of this hybrid quality. In AIT he examines the clash and the blending of disparate cultures that is part of the Singapore identity; the play looks at the “search for values one can live by in a completely new surrounding” (“Singapore Poet”). Based on some of Yeo’s own experiences as a postgraduate student in London, it deals with a group of young, middle-class, English-educated Singaporeans studying in London. Most of the action takes place in the student apartment of Siew Chye and his sister Siew Hua who, during the course of the play, becomes pregnant by a stereotyped Latin lover. Hua is contrasted to Sally Tan, who clings primly to her ‘Singaporean’ values, refusing to be adventurous. The ostensible centre of the play is Richard Lim, who is deliberately trying new experiences not available to him in Singapore. Reggie Fernandez, though peripheral to the play’s development, bursts in and out of the action with intensity and energy, unlike the distant and rather static Chye.

Like some of the earlier plays by Lim and Goh, Yeo’s play focuses on Singaporean students educated abroad. Because Yeo sets his play in London the audience is privy to the actual clash and interaction between Singaporean and English
cultures and values. The foreign setting provides a distance from which Singapore can be viewed more objectively; physical distance from the authoritarian state also allows for space and freedom, which in Singapore are more constrained. The distance from home also creates a situation in which this group of friends can be seen as a microcosm of Singapore society, to be minutely examined. Thrust into a situation so utterly different from what they would find in Singapore, how do they react? What "cultural ballast," to use a term favoured by the PAP, has Singapore, as a nation, provided them with?

The question "are you there, Singapore?" can take many meanings for this group of students. It can reflect some of the uneasiness they may feel at being away from home, and their need to refer back to Singapore for some kind of grounding as, for example, with Sally and her refusal to give up her Singaporean way of thinking and behaving. Another pertinent view is that the question asks, in genuine bewilderment, if there is a Singapore there at all. Singapore exists, politically and geographically – but is it there as a nation? Through the interactions of these friends, Yeo explores the extent to which a national identity can be said to exist.

It is instructive to note that despite the official insistence on racial and cultural classifications, none of these characters seem to define themselves by racial labels. When Hua invites Richard to the flat for some home-cooked food, for example, she serves rice and fish curry (an Indian dish rather than a Chinese one), which Richard proceeds to eat with his hands – again, an Indian rather than a Chinese habit. These hints of easy hybridity, as well as the cohesion of this little band of students, suggest the existence of an overarching Singaporean identity. But their sense of unity springs largely from the fact that they are all in London. The distance from home is significant, making the Singaporeans cling to each other, recreating their home in some small way.

Richard comments on this tendency, saying that they are "importing a little bit of Singapore here, comforting ourselves with letters, chilli powder, blachan" (AYT 46)\(^5\)

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\(^5\) This difference is effectively underlined by Yeo's stage directions for a student party. He specifies that some of the men at the party "have long hair" (AYT 65) – a fact which would be taken for granted, given the decade in which the play is set. But in Singapore, where hair length for men is determined by government legislation, this would have been seen as rebelliousness.

\(^6\) Blachan (or belacan) is a pungent dried shrimp paste, originally used by the Malays, which has become an important ingredient in the cooking of all the races in Malaysia and Singapore.
as a way of reassuring themselves that Singapore is indeed still there. We can read this clinging together as a unity born of immediate necessity, without deeper groundings. Diamond states that: “Only in isolation, outside Singapore, is it possible for these ethnic Chinese and Indians to feel a common Singaporean identity which overrides their separate ethnicities and political affinities” (132). It is also, however, possible to suggest that the very fact that they have these elements in common points to the emergence of a shared culture and identity.

However Yeo undermines this effect by his depiction of Singaporean society as racially virtually homogeneous. If most of the characters do not define themselves by race, perhaps it is because of their position as members of the dominant racial group. They are the ‘centre’ by which the ‘other’ is defined. Seet and Sankaran state that Yeo handles “characters from different ethnic backgrounds with authenticity and sensitivity” (14), but this is a generous view of the trilogy. A closer look shows that Yeo portrays a somewhat homogeneously Chinese Singapore, and that in dealing with non-Chinese characters he tends to think in stereotypes. Reggie is the only non-Chinese Singaporean in this play. George Watt suggests that Yeo positions “Chye as centre and Fernandez as margin” (87). This certainly does not reflect the multiracial character of Singapore. It does, however, reflect the underlying identity of the nation. It is – rhetoric of multiracialism aside – constructed as predominantly Chinese.

Reggie, a law student, is conceived as a stereotype: Yeo notes that Max Le Blond, director of the 1980 performance of One Year, thought that Reggie could be Eurasian. Yeo, however, had conceived him as an Indian because: “As a school boy in mixed classes in English schools, it was commonly known among Chinese boys that their Indian classmates were the ones […] with the gift of the gab and most likely to end up as lawyers” (Yeo, “Towards” 60). Yeo does not state this as being merely a common perception but as a fact, indicating that outside his own circle, he thinks in stereotypes.

In many ways, Reggie is a marginalised character: as an Indian, he is already in the minority in Singapore; his support for the political opposition marginalises him

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7 Later, Yeo specifies that he is a Malayali, and his surname indicates that his family is Catholic; even among the mainly Tamil, Hindu Indians of Singapore, then, he is in the minority.
further. On a private level, Hua pushes him to the edges of her life by not reciprocating his love for her. Unwittingly, perhaps, Yeo has accurately depicted the marginalisation of the minority peoples of Singapore. Being Chinese, he is a member of the majority in Singapore; further, as a Baba Chinese, he has a strong sense of indigeneity. It is likely, then, that he has little sense of marginalisation as experienced by the Indians and Malays of Singapore. He is expressing what he experiences as the national identity of Singapore, and in his experience it is a Chinese identity. This presents an interesting contrast with the three plays from Malaysia which I will examine in this chapter, all of which were written by members of minority populations (a Eurasian, an Indian, and a Chinese), and which grapple with the need to forge an identity which takes into consideration the complexities of the multiracial nature of the country. For the Malaysian writers, this need affects them personally. For Yeo, the need is less immediate.

Despite this, he does address the question obliquely through Hua, who becomes pregnant as a result of her relationship with Giorgio, an Italian student. At one level, her pregnancy and her decision to keep the baby hark back to Yeo’s point about the search for values to live by. By getting pregnant without the benefit or likelihood of marriage, Hua has done something that would have been considered shocking, even immoral, in 1960s Singapore. As eager as Richard to try new things, she pushes the borders of what constitutes acceptable values with this pregnancy, which can be seen as the culmination of her adventurous experimenting.

Yeo does not judge Hua’s actions; however there is implicit disapproval from Singaporean society in the figure of Chye. Hua tells Richard “Chye reminds me so much of my father […]. Stern, upright […]. What will he say, I wonder […]. (Pause). You know what he’ll say” (AYT 80). Given the paternalistic nature of the PAP it is easy to see Chye as a representative of the hegemonic viewpoint (a reading held up by his later involvement in politics) which disapproves of lax ‘Western’ ways. In this reading, Hua stands for the nation, finding its own feet and rebelling against the stern authority of the state. The nation has frequently been feminised by male writers; it has also become commonplace to compare the emergence of the nation with the process of
giving birth. Hua, then, is on the verge of giving birth to a brand new nation; since the father of her child is European it is, symbolically, a hybrid nation, which would be disapproved of by the authorities. To reinforce the link between Hua, her baby, and the slow birth of Singapore as a nation, Yeo gives the baby the birth-date of August ninth, Singapore's independence day. Singapore has already had one birthday; now, through Hua and others like her, it can be born again into a potentially different kind of life—one that works with the nation's hybridity rather than legislating against it.

The play ends with Hua deciding to keep the baby; she is won over by Richard's argument that because the baby will be born on August ninth, everything will be forgiven (AYT 94). The logic of the argument is unclear; Yeo seems to be focusing on the date as a symbol of something that unites them and makes them proud. Sally and Sarah (Richard's English girlfriend) come in with gifts for Hua, and they end up dancing in a circle, singing "All You Need is Love." This is a potentially mawkish ending, and Prem Kumar chose to end the performance of the play before this point, leaving Hua undecided about the fate of her baby (W. J. Tan). However, the final stage direction in the published text suggests darker overtones than are evident in the song and dance. Yeo specifies that Reggie, in love with Hua and upset about her pregnancy, stands unnoticed at the door: "He watches, grim-faced, as the five people go on singing and dancing, unaware of his presence" (AYT 95).

Reggie's love for Hua can be viewed as the love of the idealist for his nation—an idea which is amplified and made explicit in Changi. Here, the notion receives only tentative exploration. Richard suggests that Reggie's extreme reaction to the pregnancy is motivated by his feeling that "because he loves you, he has a claim on you" (AYT 87). Reggie is incensed that Hua has strayed from his ideals, just as he becomes upset when his idealistic notions of what is right for Singapore are ignored or overridden.

Politically, all the characters demonstrate a high level of commitment to Singapore. Even Richard, who is an admitted Anglophile (AYT 87), asserts that: "Back home you can't help being involved" (AYT 90). Yeo uses his characters to express a wide range of political viewpoints. In the opening scene, the talk turns political when

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8 The idea of the representation of the nation through male and female bodies will be discussed in greater detail in the section dealing with Changi.
Reggie appears; Yeo allows both Opposition and PAP stances an equal say through Reggie and Chye. He does not constrain the argument in any way; in fact because he has created such a vigorous character in Reggie, Chye's pro-PAP arguments seem pallid in contrast.

Unfortunately, apart from the energy embodied in Reggie, the whole political background to the play is lifeless. This is curious, considering the number of things actually going on, both in Singapore and the world at large, during the late 1960s. Hua and Richard both go on demonstration marches, and Richard even makes a speech at one such march. Despite this, Yeo is not successful at bringing that larger political world to life.

Part of the problem lies in the actual staging of the play; it is set almost entirely in Chye's flat, and except for Sarah and Giorgio, the only people who populate the flat are Singaporeans. This serves to create a world that is both physically and spiritually small. Yeo tries to widen their narrow world but does so purely through their speeches; it therefore remains an intellectual or mental exercise, rather than one that is dramatised and thus brought to life. This play is, despite one reviewer's contention that "it moves" ("Singapore Play Packed"), clumsy and static. Production photographs of AYT also indicate that the acting was a little stiff, though it should be remembered that after years of expatriate domination, local actors and directors had only recently begun to work regularly, and therefore lacked experience. The two pictures from One Year, reproduced below, illustrate the woodenness of earlier acting styles, and the more natural and physically comfortable style visible in the actors from the 1990s. The actors in the 1980 production seem posed and stiff. Apart from this, the theatrical idiom with which the actors and directors were most familiar in the 1970s, both through education and play-going experience, would have been that of the well-made play, the staple fare of most expatriate-run theatre groups.

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9 Singapore was dealing with its recent separation and independence from Malaysia, Communism remained a threat, the British were planning on pulling their military forces out of Singapore (thus potentially causing unemployment); Vietnam was the major issue in the larger world.
10 For various reasons I have been unable to attend performances of any of the three plays, and notes on performance are based on production photographs.
This resulted in difficulty in finding a Singaporean performance idiom. Max Le Blond, speaking of obstacles he faced in directing *One Year*, declared that "Singaporeanisms, the 'lahs' and 'mans' which were and are integrally woven into the fabric of quotidian discourse suddenly seemed alien, bizarre, and this persisted in spite of a dramatic context which rendered their use perfectly legitimate" (117). The inability to transfer onto stage what seems natural in life suggests a high level of discomfort with close scrutiny. This in turn indicates a lack of confidence, or at least some uncertainty, about the identity being projected. The difficulty experienced by the
Singaporean actors in physically and vocally expressing their Singapore identity tells us that it had not yet been normalised within the body.

One Year Back Home

Wavering between the political and the personal in AYT, Yeo eventually leans towards the personal. In One Year, his focus on politics is much sharper as he brings the clash between the PAP and the Opposition to the fore. This sharper focus suggests Yeo’s growing awareness of the political control exerted over individual expression, and the part played by politics in the formation of national identity. He therefore moves away from the portrayal of the purely personal or political, melding the two but concentrating on politics as the real centre of action.

The friends from London have been back in Singapore for one year. Chye and Reggie have both entered politics, Chye with the PAP and Reggie with the opposition Worker’s Party; they are standing for election in a constituency which has fallen vacant due to the death of the member (Chye’s political mentor). Hua has formed a relationship with Gerald Tan, an engineer who is contemplating migration to Australia. Reggie loses the by-election and is jailed for expressing pro-Communist views in some of his speeches. Gerald, inspired by the commitment to Singapore demonstrated by Chye and Reggie, decides against migrating; instead, he commits himself to Singapore, Hua, and her daughter Lisa.

It took Yeo eighteen months to obtain a performance licence for One Year, indicating the sharpness of its political content. Through Chye and Reggie, Yeo presents a contrast between the PAP point of view, which demands adherence to its program of rugged individualism as a means towards the creation of a Singaporean identity, and the opposition view, which demands a more humanistic, liberal approach and greater individual expression. Turnbull explains ‘rugged individualism’ as a system whereby: “The government sought to inculcate discipline and dedication, to toughen moral fibre by spartan Puritanism, to build a ‘rugged society’ and wipe out corruption, both in high politics and in everyday administration” (292). In the Singapore context, the term does not denote toughness and self-reliance, so much as a need to work hard and live a spartan life in order to create economic prosperity. While individualism
suggests a high degree of independence, the whole concept was state initiated and ordered. In the PAP dominated schema, Singaporeans are constructed as needing to be controlled, as a lack of control can lead to chaos, which in turn could destroy the country. The state constantly reminds the people of past crises such as racial riots, which, it asserts, came about because people and ideas slipped beyond the bounds of control. The implication is that only authoritative control, and submission to it, can ensure continued stability.\footnote{A similar situation is apparent in Malaysia, where potential unrest is often quelled by the authorities raising the spectre of May thirteenth 1969, with its attendant violence and bloodshed.} Thus political motivations (notably the desire to maintain a tight grip on power) have engineered a particular Singaporean identity – apolitical, compliant and, with increased economic prosperity, complaisant. Authority inheres entirely in the government.

This political attitude has, almost from Singapore’s beginnings, been opposed by “Singapore’s most celebrated opposition leader,” J. B. Jeyaretnam, founder of the Worker’s Party (Barr 299). Barr, tracing Jeyaretnam’s career as Lee Kuan Yew’s bête-noire, portrays him as a tireless but ultimately ineffective campaigner for the power of the people. Barr notes that at a 2001 rally, Jeyaretnam affirmed his belief that: “Power doesn’t belong to the government. It belongs to the people. They delegate it to the government” (299). Were this the case, agency would be back in the hands of the people, and this would potentially destabilise the state’s authority. To avoid this, the hegemonic state completely undermines and isolates the opposition and renders it ineffective.\footnote{Just how ineffective was brought home to me in April 2004. Standing at the entrance to a busy shopping complex in Singapore’s Orchard Road, I watched as Jeyaretnam stood on the sidewalk, trying to sell one of his books to passers-by. No one even acknowledged him in the twenty or so minutes that I was watching.} The people will, effectively, have no choice about whom to elect. Yeo has referred to this tactic in AYT – Reggie asserts that the opposition was manipulated and intimidated into not fielding any candidates in the election (AYT 52). In One Year, Yeo shows these tactics in action, thus bringing to life the ideas which were only talked about in the earlier play.

My earlier references to Jeyaretnam are significant to this play. Yeo has claimed that the character of Reggie is based on his friend Michael Fernandez, a contemporary of his at university, who took part in opposition politics and was jailed.
and interrogated (S. F. Ong, "Accidental"). However, being Indian and Christian, Reggie can also be read as analogous to Jeyaretnam. The comparison would be obvious to most Singaporeans, painting Reggie as a quixotic figure tilting at the windmill of the PAP. Thus, Reggie is tainted with the potential for failure, even before the contest is truly engaged. Jeyaretnam is Singapore's most well-known opposition figure, but this does not mean he has been especially successful. He did manage to win the seat of Anson in two elections, serving as Member from 1981 to 1986. Since then, however, the PAP has rendered him powerless, bankrupting him through a series of lawsuits. Any comparison between Reggie and Jeyaretnam, then, serves to suggest that Reggie cannot succeed. Here, Yeo is being realistic in his perception of the potential of opposition politics to succeed when it is up against the political behemoth that is the PAP.

However, this does not mean that Yeo uses this play purely to put forward the PAP view. He uses the political fight between Chye and Reggie to examine the shortcomings of the national identity as constituted by the state, and offers alternative viewpoints which are more humanistic and liberal.

Yeo's approach to the presentation of opposition politics is interesting. That he wrote about it all without portraying it as irresponsible and dangerous is highly commendable. State-controlled media channels espouse this negative view of the opposition, even through something as seemingly innocuous as a theatre review.13 Violet Oon, in her review of AYT, demonises Reggie as "a cynic, who pokes fun at the establishment and finds an outlet for his frustration in raillery" ("Bob's Play"). Yeo's actual portrayal of Reggie and his ideas, however, is far more open and sympathetic than suggested by Oon's response, and in fact caused him problems with the licensing authorities.

In his interview with Ban Kah Choon, Yeo quotes extensively from the correspondence relating to his attempts to get a performance licence for the play. The correspondence indicates that for the sake of getting his play on stage, Yeo made statements and concessions which seemingly undermined his balanced stance. In one

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13 I do not mean to suggest that the state goes so far as to vet theatre reviews for pro-opposition stances; but I do find it significant that the reviewer's response to Reggie is so vituperative. It suggests that the state-endorsed viewpoint of the danger represented by the opposition has been effectively internalised by many Singaporeans.
of his letters to the Ministry of Culture, for example, he reduced his portrayal of the opposition point of view to little more than "implied criticism" of the PAP ("Interview" 28). He further underplayed the effectiveness of the opposition view in this play by stating that a close reading of Reggie's "anti-PAP tirades [...] would reveal that Fernandez compromises himself unwittingly by his rhetoric. There is something simplistic and naive about his political views which affects his credibility" ("Interview" 28). Certainly, Reggie is often wrong-footed in his arguments with Chye. For example, when Reggie lambasts the PAP 'uniform' of white clothes (the phraseology subtly likens the politicians who wear them to the Biblical whitened sepulchres), Chye hits out at Reggie's own hypocrisy:

CHYE: I could also point out that my white and beige, economically speaking, is better than your flamboyant kurtas and Levi's. You rant against the new rich, you rage against consumerism, you help the poor, but your mode of dress is not consistent with your politics. (One Year 132).

Often, Yeo depicts Reggie as being reduced to silence by Chye's eloquent speeches. On the surface, Yeo does seem to lend support to the PAP view, via the confident and eloquent Chye, while rendering the Worker's Party less credible through Reggie's apparent naivete. And in his desire to see his play staged, Yeo pragmatically highlights what is favourable to the authorities.14

On the level of inter-personal dynamics, however, Yeo subtly undermines and inverts his politically expedient pro-PAP stance. Reggie has, from his first appearance in AYT, been a lively and interesting character. He bursts in on a rather static scene, his humour and briskness enlivening things considerably. Chye, by contrast, is presented as someone humourless, stern, and less than understanding. Hua's description of him as "[s]tern, upright" (AYT 80) foreshadows Chye as the unbending, patriarchal PAP figure. He is unsympathetic towards Hua when he hears of her pregnancy; Reggie's anger about Hua's pregnancy stems from his love for her. Reggie's feelings are given an immediate, personal dimension, while Chye is a cold and distant figure. This brings to the fore the question of the importance of performance and individual interpretation in

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14 The dilemma faced by writers, of whether or not to give in to the demands of the censors, is explored in greater detail in chapter two.
defining the meaning of a text. As Yeo points out, “because the performance is interpretative the production on stage may depart considerably from the written script even when the script is observed” (“Interview” 33). Thus although Yeo’s script has been amended to fall in line with authoritative demands, interpretation of character in performance, as well as individual responses, create space for dissenting views. The words, baldly stated, appear to toe the party line. The performative slant put on them, however, is more open.

In One Year, then, despite the changes Yeo makes to the script, Reggie is still a funnier, warmer, more human character than Chye, who comes across as bombastic and smug. He gives Reggie ‘advice’ on how not to lose the election too badly: “Change your clothes, wear white if you must, trim your hair, but don’t perm it, skim the fat from your speeches and you may just avoid losing your deposit” (One Year 134). He displays unbearable smugness in his certainty that he will beat Reggie in the elections. More inimical than that, however, is the fact that his advice to Reggie states baldly that the opposition can never succeed. The only way to avoid humiliating loss, says Chye, is to conform, to become like the PAP: do not wear colourful clothes, do not do outlandish things to your appearance, do not indulge in flamboyant oratory – do not, in other words, deviate from authoritatively-constituted identity.

When Chye betrays Reggie by denouncing him for expressing “pro-Communist and subversive views during the campaign” (One Year 146), Yeo does not defend him very vigorously. Chye’s only defence for calling Reggie a pro-Communist15 is to say “I have no choice, Hua. He forced me to do it with his extreme speeches” (One Year 154). This is an interesting line; Chye states that his assertion of political hegemony (that is, the removal of opposition to the PAP) is the fault of the Other (in this case Reggie). Essentially, this assertion positions the PAP as blameless, driven to action by the ‘extremity’ of the other’s actions – for “extreme,” read ‘threatening to the hegemony.’ Reggie, however, refers to nobler principles: “Honour, friendship, principles – these have not changed, Hua” (One Year 147). His appeal to these ideals, reminiscent of

15 It should be borne in mind that in the 1960s and 1970s, Communism was seen as a forceful and very real threat to Singapore’s stability; while the PAP had cooperated with the Communist Party of Malaya in its fight to win independence, it had since renounced all contact with them. The hold that the Communists still had on many Chinese-educated Singaporeans represented a threat to the PAP hegemony. While the threat is much reduced today, communism is still a byword for potential instability and insurrection.
Jeyaretnam’s adherence to principles of equality, liberalism and humanism, indicates that he views politics as a noble and moral arena; Chye’s actions suggest a baser, more pragmatic attitude.

Politically, Yeo seems to be espousing the PAP stance, while making mildly subversive but generally acceptable points about the need for an opposition. In his portrayal of the personal sides of the two politicians, however, he challenges the validity of the government’s hegemonic position as producer of a national identity. Chye, as a representative of the PAP and its views on nationalism, is an unattractively cool, detached character (it is interesting that throughout the trilogy, he is the only one of the main characters not to form some kind of emotional attachment to someone else). Chye is the Singaporean as hard-headed pragmatist. Yeo presents an alternative in the form of the more likeable, more human Reggie.

Yeo questions the development of the national identity further through the character of Gerald Tan, Hua’s boyfriend. Because Gerald is not a politician, Yeo’s questioning of identity through him takes place on a more personal level. Ultimately however Gerald’s decisions are influenced by the political convictions of Reggie and Chye. Through Gerald, Yeo raises interesting questions about being Singaporean.

Gerald, an engineer with the Singapore Armed Forces, is applying to migrate to Australia. He is an accurate reflection of what has happened (and continues to happen) as mobile, well-educated young professionals choose to head away from Singapore in search of better pay or a less regimented lifestyle. He can be seen as a product of Singapore’s immediate post-independence emphasis on “rugged individualism” as the means by which economic prosperity (and hence social and political stability) could be achieved. Taken to the logical extreme, this individualistic society becomes selfish and materialistic, a point made by both Gerald (One Year 118) and Reggie (One Year 122).  

Set against this selfishness are ideas of loyalty to larger entities – family, military, state and so on. In creating a national identity, the government of a nation must provide its citizens with common symbols of nationhood, such as the flag and the

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16 Yeo’s view seems prescient; as will be explained in the next chapter, Kuo Pao Kun’s Descendants
national anthem. But more than just constructing these symbols, the authorities must also ensure that these symbols are positively identified with, thus creating the imagined community. Gerald’s negative reaction would suggest that Singapore has not been successful in doing this. When Hua asks why he feels the need to leave Singapore, he tells her “I don’t understand why I should be loyal to the State or the military or to the idea of filial piety.” He goes on to point out that: “It always comes down to some abstract idea, an obligation to something impersonal” (One Year 117). Gerald’s sense of identification with Singapore has not moved to the level of an affective tie; he feels no real engagement with his society because the symbols of nation are, for him, too disengaged from his experiences and emotions as an individual.

Gerald’s dilemma over whether or not to commit to Singapore is reflected in his relationship with Hua, who still figures as a symbol of the nation. In both her personal and symbolic roles, Hua wants Gerald’s commitment. On a personal level, she wants companionship, security, and a father for her daughter Lisa – a desire severely complicated by the fact that she has neglected to actually tell Gerald that she has a daughter.17 Yeo’s portrayal of Hua is inconsistent: at one moment she confides to her father that she wants to get married because “[i]t’s so lonely by myself” (One Year 114), but at the next moment she declares to her mother that she can take care of herself (One Year 115). Hua is not a particularly well-conceived character, and in fact is more believable as a symbol of the nation than as an individual. If she represents Singapore as nation, then her mixed-race (hybrid) child is the multiracial future of the nation – a future in which race is not authoritatively and unproblematically defined along monolithic lines. Gerald’s ability or inability to commit to that future will hint at the potential for Singapore to grow and survive.

At the end of the play, Gerald quite suddenly finds the commitment he has lacked so far. However, it comes so abruptly as to be utterly unconvincing. We see him telling Hua that he is still thinking of going to Australia, and that he does not want to be

explores the idea that Singapore focuses on the material to the detriment of the spiritual.
17 In this context, the reactions of Chye and Reggie are again instructive. When Hua complains that not many young men want to start a relationship with her because of her daughter, her brother’s very peculiar response is: “Perhaps you shouldn’t tell them about her” (One Year 110); he appears to be advocating a relationship based on deceit, or at least less than complete honesty. Reggie, on the other hand, sympathises with Gerald’s reaction, declaring that any man would be upset at being treated in this way.
an "instant father" to Lisa (One Year 150). Moments later he sees Reggie being arrested for making inflammatory, pro-Communist speeches. This is a moment of potential ambiguity, as it calls to mind the purges of supposedly communist and socialist elements in Singapore, as well as the constant persecution of the Worker's Party which led to Jeyaretnam's imprisonment and eventual financial ruin. Chye tries to paint Reggie as an extremist; but Yeo has portrayed him as something of an innocent, perhaps even a dupe of his collaborator, the sinister Soh Teck Soh, who "has a known pro-Communist record" (One Year 139). The emotional subtext here challenges Chye's pro-PAP stance.

Somewhat unconvincingly, Gerald suddenly finds himself overcome at the memory of the eloquence and firm convictions both Chye and Reggie have displayed, and decides that rather than going to Australia, he will stay in Singapore because: "There are things to do here and running away does not help" (One Year 157). His idea of helping is to work with Chye in his constituency. The sudden leap from lack of commitment to full commitment is too sudden and too unconvincingly motivated to ring true.

However, what occurs here is not just a matter of poor dramaturgy, but also, to a large extent, of the effect of authoritarian circumscription on the playwright. The authorities have a well-documented history of stamping on oppositional or alternative views voiced in print; there are numerous cases of opposition leaders, journalists and publications being sued for publishing articles deemed libellous to Singapore or its leaders.18 The social and political situation within which he is writing, therefore, has left Yeo somewhat circumscribed. While he has brought up politically sensitive topics and voiced opposition viewpoints, he has also had to balance this with representation of the official government viewpoint. In fact, he has had to tip the balance towards the PAP. He was, for example, unable to leave any ambiguity in the play's ending: Gerald says there are "things to do here," but has to specify that he will be doing these things

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18 Christopher Lingle, formerly with the National University of Singapore, was tried for contempt of court for suggesting that some East Asian countries rely upon "a compliant judiciary to bankrupt opposition politicians," and convicted in absentia (Lingle 5). Singapore Democratic Party secretary-general Chee Soon Juan has been sued by both Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong (Strange). The International Herald Tribune, the Far Eastern Economic Review, The Economist and The Asian Wall Street Journal "have paid large fines or had their circulation restricted through lawsuits brought by ruling-party stalwarts" ("Mentor Lee").
under the aegis of the PAP by working with Chye (One Year 157). Any criticism of the government has to be oblique, buried under a surface covering of approval.19

Another particularly interesting point to consider here is the notion of what is ‘Singaporean.’ Can there be only one way of defining or experiencing Singapore? The reaction of the censors would imply that this is indeed the case. Yeo highlights this particular passage (Gerald’s ‘conversion’) in his interview with Ban. Gerald’s words were singled out by the censors as being “ambiguous;” Yeo then revised the ending of the play to state “explicitly what was implied. This will give my play a pro-Singapore ending” (30). Yeo’s phrasing here is telling: what he in fact does is end the play on a pro-PAP note. Does this mean that pro-PAP and pro-Singapore mean the same thing, that the PAP is Singapore? Commitment can only be defined in terms of authoritative definitions; commitment such as that displayed by Reggie – that is, a commitment to openness and liberalism – is viewed as subversive, dangerous, anti-Singaporean. Singaporeanness, then, is that which is constituted by the authorities. Yeo questions this formulation, but can only do so subtly.

Changi

Although written in the mid-1990s, this play is set twenty years earlier, picking up from where One Year left off. Reggie is in Changi prison, being interrogated and, it is implied, tortured by faceless representatives of the state. Reggie is eventually persuaded by Chye to do a televised ‘interview,’ which will be heavily censored so that he cannot express his actual opinions, after which he chooses to go into political exile in London rather than abandon politics as the government demands that he do. He returns from London on the death of his father; personal ties and his sense of responsibility towards his ageing mother override his political convictions. However, he is unable to completely quell his instincts and speaks at a Worker’s Party rally, putting himself in danger of re-arrest. Before that can happen, however, Chye and Reggie meet, with Chye trying to persuade Reggie to join the PAP. Yeo leaves the ending ambiguous – does Chye succeed in bringing Reggie over to the PAP, or does he choose friendship over politics? In Changi, the political is complicated and humanised.

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19 This need becomes more evident in plays such as Kuo’s Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and Kee Thuan Chye’s We Could **** You, Mr. Birch, which will be discussed in the next chapter.
We see for the first time the humanity behind the politics: the sacrifices that have to be made, as well as the principles that may have to be discarded along the way.

_Changi_ is the most politically mature, and also the most politically daring, of the Trilogy. Yeo goes much further in this play than in _One Year_, despite which he did not face the eighteen-month wait for a performance licence. This suggests a greater openness on the part of the PAP towards allowing a more liberal expression of opposition views. It should, however, be borne in mind that Yeo had by now established himself as an important Singaporean writer, and also held a senior academic post at the National Institute of Education, and therefore had seniority and a position as one of Singapore literature's elder statesmen to back him up.

Going back to Diamond's reference to the Trilogy as a *Bildungsroman*, the real maturation for most of the characters in the Trilogy seems to come in _Changi_; Chye, for example, grows from uncritical party mouthpiece into the stalwart of the PAP who nonetheless considers putting friendship before state policy. Yeo also brings a more multi-dimensional, integrated focus to the connection between the public and the personal. Finally, the relative outspokenness of _Changi_ points to greater maturity in the government, as it learns to be more open to opposition. Although Yeo is writing of events set in the 1970s, he does so from a distance of nearly twenty years. Thus, although writing of a time in which the state was still deeply authoritarian and repressive, he brings with him the perspective of what has become of the authoritarian state since that time. Koh and Ooi, writing in 2000, have noted that "the PAP government has sought to increase the mechanisms for consultation of the populace" which testifies to the fact that "the PAP acknowledges the demands for greater political participation and the need for political change in this area of state-society relations in Singapore" ("Achieving" 13). This is a radical move from the PAP's initial stance that the state had to control its populace in almost every aspect of life.

This suggests that there is less top-down inscription of identities and attitudes. Ho Chwee Luan, however, citing Sanjay Krishnan, maintains that in the field of the arts, at least, liberalisation does not go far enough, that artistic expression remains a controlled and mediated form: "According to Sanjay Krishnan, an artist can produce
certain critical or overtly 'political' art without being censored as long as 'the concerns of artistic production remain confined to the realm of the private'” (25 - 26).

Despite apparent liberalisation, state control remains central. That heavy-handed state control (or the perception that it exists) still governs actions in Singapore is apparent in the response of the National Arts Council to Robert Yeo's request for funding for the publication of *The Singapore Trilogy*. In 1999, well after all three plays had been staged, with no political repercussions, the National Arts Council turned down Yeo's request because “being a public agency, NAC is unable to fund works that cast important public institutions in a bad light” (National Arts Council). Yeo does not attempt to provide a concrete solution to this problem, possibly because a simple solution does not present itself.

Yeo has referred to *Changi* as “the play where youthful idealism comes smack against reality and loses” (S. F. Ong, “Accidental”). One response to that is to suggest that it is Reggie who finally loses his “youthful idealism.” Yeo presents this as a part of Reggie's maturing process, rather than as the simple triumph of pragmatism or cynicism over idealism. His journey towards maturity and the attendant need to temper his burning idealism is conveyed most forcefully in two scenes, one with Hua, and one with his parents.

In scene two, Hua comes to visit him in prison, dressed in bright red. In the 1997 performance, director Elangovan had her wearing “a bright red bustier bodysuit and knee-high velvet boots” (S. F. Ong, “It Would be Better”), making her rather more vampish and seductive than the original stage directions would indicate. There is nothing in the text to suggest that she is a vamp or seductress, so in performance, this sexy version of Hua comes across as the projection of Reggie's desire. In her review, Ong goes on to suggest that Hua is the “vamp, seducing Fernandez from political martyrdom.” However, Yeo's approach is more complex than Ong's remark indicates; indeed, it seems that in this instance, Elangovan has misunderstood the significance of Hua. If she continues to symbolise Singapore, then in what sense is she seducing Reggie? Towards what, or away from what, is she seducing him?
In this scene, Hua is for the first time overtly compared to Singapore. I would suggest that by dressing her in red, Yeo intends to underscore her function as a symbol of nationhood; the Singapore flag is white and bright red, and it is that association, rather than the association with sexual passion, which Yeo seeks to awake with his reference to the colour. The text does not offer a single instance of sexual contact between Hua and Reggie; in fact, Hua underlines the impossibility of any relationship between them other than friendship, by informing him that she is pregnant with husband Gerald’s child. Thus, as Reggie says, she is “someone whom I can touch, talk to, love, but cannot have. You’re like our country, your country and mine” (Changi 171). He declares his love for Singapore, but at the same time realises that his opposition to the government precludes him from ‘having’ Singapore. Here, Yeo constructs Hua as “the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch” (Boehmer 6). Being pregnant, she is on the verge of ‘producing’ the nation. However, her relationship to both Reggie and Chye “excludes her from the sphere of public national life” (Boehmer 6). She is their helper, but it is they who are, as men, “cast as the author and subject of the nation” (Boehmer 6). Singapore is thus reified as a patriarchal nation, represented by male rather than female bodies.

In scene four, Reggie’s parents visit him. He now begins to question the ideals to which he has held. Whereas in One Year Reggie refuses to compromise, in Changi we see him torn between his ideals and his ties with his family. In the face of his mother’s obvious anguish at seeing his suffering, he is unable to state categorically that he will refuse to adhere to the government’s request that he abstain from politics for some time. He is eventually persuaded by Chye to go on television for an interview/confession. He knows that the interview will be edited, so merely going on camera and being unable to freely express his views represents a compromise for him. The government also demands that he refrain from political activity; unable to accept this condition, he chooses exile in London as a means of retaining his personal and political freedom. However, personal ties bring him back to Singapore: his father dies, and he must return to be with his mother. Pulled between political ideals and personal responsibilities, he finds that his ideals must give way.
It is also possible to see increased maturity in Chye. In the first two plays he is an unquestioning supporter of the PAP. In Changi, however, he subtly begins to counter the PAP in small but telling ways. In One Year he implicitly believes in the policies of the PAP, but in Changi he occasionally shows that he disagrees with policy, and seems to have adopted a strategy of trying to effect change from within. He is angered by all the publicity which Reggie focuses on the potential redevelopment of Bugis Street because it will hamper his efforts to save it (Changi 202). Yeo puts Chye and Reggie in a new light here, somewhat reversing the positions they held in the two earlier plays. Chye is more sympathetic, more humane. His less hard-line approach suggests greater maturity, both political and personal. In Chye's case, political maturity does not imply loss of idealism. Rather, his idealism, which was formerly manifested in a blind belief in the PAP, is now tempered with more awareness of other voices and needs, such that he sometimes finds himself at odds with the authorities in his party.

Yeo shows that this increased maturity and regaining of idealism are part of Chye's personal development, rather than being linked to his public position. The PAP, figured in the earlier plays as distant and sternly paternalistic, is here seen as sinister and controlling. The Changi interrogators, for example, are faceless characters identified only by number. Ong Sor Fern notes that in performance, the interrogators wore "Chinese opera paint and [carried] Indian martial arts sticks" ("It Would be Better"). The face paint turns human faces into masks, thus lending them a stylisation that further dehumanises them. The use of the martial arts sticks deepens the sense of menace; physical violence is not used on stage, but it is suggested. A further point about the performance is interesting: the cast list of the 1997 performance indicates that three actors, one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian, played the roles of the interrogators (Changi 160). Thus, the menace of the authoritarian state is shared among all the races, suggesting that the entire nation is complicit in accepting and enforcing authoritarian rule. The impact of this point in performance is questionable, however, in that race would not be physically apparent (or would be less apparent) once the face

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20 He declares, for example, that: "When your hair is cut, you just lose a bit of hair, but not your personal liberty" (One Year 133), overlooking the fact that not allowing the individual the right to govern his or her own physical appearance is an infringement of personal liberty.

21 Bugis Street, formerly a lively red-light district, did in fact get redeveloped. Yeo's audiences would have known, and this would have coloured their reactions to Chye's efforts to save it, and the obstacles placed in his path by Reggie. Here, Reggie appears obstructionist.
paint was applied. However, the suggestion is there, and might be a point for consideration. In the script, Yeo makes no mention of race, leaving the point open and unclarified. However he does overtly connect these menacing figures with the government, as shown by the following exchange:

THREE: And if we still don’t get the answers, you will be here for a long time.

FERNANDEZ: How long?

THREE: As long as this government is in power. (Changi 163)

Yeo emphasises this sense of menace and inhumanity in scene nine, in which Chye takes a telephone call from the Minister of Home Affairs. Yeo specifies that Chye stands to take the call, which emphasises his relatively subordinate position. The Minister does not appear in person; he is a disembodied voice, suggesting a Big Brother-like omnipresence. In the 1997 performance, Elangovan had an actor playing the Minister on stage, wearing “full Chinese-opera regalia, complete with gestures and stylised speech patterns” (S. F. Ong, “It Would be Better”). Again, the Chinese-opera elements dehumanise the figure of the Minister. It is significant that in using face-painting and mask-making as techniques of dehumanisation, Elangovan turns to the Chinese opera rather than to Malay or Indian performance styles which use masks and which would constitute culturally relevant statements. Is this perhaps a reflection of the dominance of Chinese culture in ostensibly multiracial Singapore?

Elangovan seems to have missed the maturing, increasingly human aspect of Chye. In performance, for example, in the scene with the Minister, the actor playing Chye was made to “mime a panting, yelping dog” (S. F. Ong, “It Would be Better”); where Yeo’s text does carry suggestions that Chye is listening to ‘his master’s voice,’ the suggestion is underplayed. The text is far more sympathetic to Chye. Immediately after his conversation with the Minister, he has to deal with Hua, who comes to him worried about Reggie. Because she and Chye discuss Reggie as a friend rather than a dissident or a political opponent, the discussion becomes personal and more human, so that Chye is also humanised. By insisting on treating him as a PAP stooge without these warmer human feelings, Elangovan does a disservice to the subtleties of Yeo’s play.
Yeo's tendency to humanise Chye becomes clearer in the final scene between Chye and Reggie. In this final scene, they talk of betrayal; Reggie harks back to Chye's betrayal of him in *One Year*, while Chye now accuses Reggie of wanting to betray him by exposing an old student petition, signed by Chye, calling for the abolition of the Internal Security Act (ISA). Reggie responds, rather childishly, that Chye started it, and accuses him of mouthing what his "PAP masters" want him to say. Chye confounds him by quoting from E. M. Forster: "'I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country'" (*Changi* 213). Reggie is astounded by this response, and asks "You mean-" but just what Chye means is not made clear. As Watt notes: "We do not know which will dominate: habit, rivalry, affection, a shared history, ideology, or a regard for the State" (87).

Seet and Sankaran state that Yeo foregrounds "the ideology of nationalism" above all other ideologies presented in the play. They go on to say that: "This perhaps explains why, despite the play's several inflammatory passages that contest the status quo of the play, it ultimately engenders an unproblematic closure that reaffirms the status quo" (17). I would argue that this ending in fact overtly questions the status quo. It could be read as a plea from Chye to Reggie not to betray him. It could, with greater validity, be read as an affirmation from Chye that he will not betray his friend again. It is after all Chye rather than Reggie who reads the quotation, and the fact that he has a copy of it in his pocket suggests that it is something he has been considering for a while. Weighing party politics against the calls of friendship, he chooses in favour of the latter. Chye is thus humanised, while the PAP is not. By showing Chye's increasing maturity to be separate from PAP policy, Yeo suggests the possibility of moving towards a different kind of national identity – one not determined by the PAP hegemony.

The focus in Yeo's trilogy has been largely on the political landscape of Singapore, and as Diamond suggests, it has about it something of the flavour of the *Bildungsroman*. The sense of development and progress is strongest in Chye, who manages to become more humane by tempering PAP policy with his own humanity. Yeo thus suggests, subtly, his opposition to the tenets of PAP governance, without ever
advocating outright change. The Malaysian writers, in contrast, writing between 1967 and 1970, appear to be more open and direct about presenting an agenda for change through their plays – an openness that would, sadly, soon disappear.

From Hybridity to Essentialisation: *New Drama One*

Like their Singaporean counterparts, the Malaysian playwrights represented in *New Drama One* also seek an alternative to the hegemonic construction of identity, but their search is articulated in terms of race and culture. Writing about the English-language drama of the late 1960s, Antony Price notes that most Malaysian authors “feel the need to [...] tell the truth about the whole of Malaysian life as they see it, not just about one race” (“Crippled” 3). This comment anticipates Farish Noor’s assertion that the national narrative should mirror the diversity within the nation (*Other Malaysia* 165). Lloyd Fernando, however, also points out the difficulty inherent in early attempts to do precisely this, noting that as a writer “one of my major problems was overcoming my own racial prejudices and avoiding the racial stereotypes in my mind which had congealed over the years” (“Truth” 220 - 221). Fernando’s words show that Malaysia had moved from colony to state without finding a way to overcome the divisions within its society; not only did society think in terms of difference, it also saw in terms of stereotypes – a fact inimical to the creation of a national identity if we think of it (as does Renan) as focusing on common ground rather than on difference.

We might profitably question why national identity in Malaysia took on a cultural rather than political bias, while in Singapore politics and economics were central. One important point is that Malaysia does not quite have the equivalent of an all-powerful party similar to the PAP. Certainly the *Barisan Nasional* (BN), or National Front, has, like the PAP, been in power since Independence. Malaysia is, like Singapore, effectively a one-party state, because the opposition does not have the strength to completely disrupt or unseat the BN. However, the opposition in Malaysia does have considerably more power than in Singapore, controlling some state governments and providing an audible voice in Parliament. Dissenting voices exist and, although there is considerable government control over these matters, are heard. Another point to consider is that the Barisan Nasional consists of three parties, all of
which are racially based; even politics, then, foregrounds the centrality of race and culture to the Malaysian national and political identity. In Singapore, although racial labels are of paramount importance, the state tries to keep race and culture within the private sphere, while maintaining the facade of a 'neutral' multiracial state. In Malaysia, the state could not be neutral in matters related to race and culture, especially after the violence of the 1969 riots. It has been seen as politically important, therefore, that the Malaysian government highlight race and culture, deliberately favouring the Malays and their culture.

In 1982, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof noted that the aim of Malaysian writers as articulated by Price had not been achieved. Yousof points out that deep divisions have hindered movement across racial and cultural boundaries; writers cannot move beyond “the cultural and particularly linguistic ‘shells’ within which they live [...] because they do not understand any culture but their own” (22). Yousof contends that in order to capture “a local spirit,” writers must cross cultural boundaries, that is, there must be an element of intentional hybridity, of deliberate cultural mixing. Continued existence in the “shells” he mentions militates against hybrid production. However, Yousof’s comments on the individual’s understanding of his or her “own” culture suggest that he still thinks in terms of separation. What is a person’s “own” culture in the context of modern Malaysia? Given that the majority of English-language dramatists as well as their audiences consist of English-educated urbanites, a substantial part of the culture they actually practise would in fact be what Yousof calls “a borrowed, modern, westernised urban culture” (22). That culture, rather than the one deemed ‘correct’ by authority, is surely ‘their’ culture. However, it is an organically hybrid culture which crosses racial barriers, and is therefore not recognised as an official culture of Malaysia.

Malaysia’s cultural identity was constructed to maintain power structures and political and economic hegemony. The main aim of the post-independence government was to “mould a new Malaysian citizen whose loyalty would be to the nation instead of a particular state or ethnic group” (Andaya and Andaya 289). However, the basis for

22 The three plays are collected in the volume *New Drama One*, edited by Lloyd Fernando.
23 These are UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress).
the creation of this citizen caused contention: the BN "decided that the basis for creating a future citizenry would be Malaya's traditional culture and heritage, meaning Malay language and culture. Non-Malays, however, argued that a more appropriate path was to work towards a Malaysian identity which would reflect the country's multi-ethnic background" (Andaya and Andaya 290). This point remained openly contentious until the riots of May 1969. After this, the introduction of the Rukunegara as well as the eventual formulation of the National Cultural Policy meant that the definition was officially and inarguably slanted towards Malay hegemony. The constitution of the Malaysian national identity has been removed from the sphere of public discussion (questions of race and religion are considered 'sensitive' and are therefore expected not to be questioned); however, private uneasiness or dissatisfaction cannot be regulated, and it has found expression in theatre.

The three plays to be studied here were written at a particular cusp of Malaysia's history, in the period just before and after the 1969 riots, and therefore represent the hopes of a generation of new Malaysians who felt that a hybrid culture and identity were possible, but who had those hopes dashed post-1969. They are interesting for their attempts to overcome authority-imposed thinking about race and difference, and also for moving beyond stereotypes and narrow definitions of culture.

In Malaysia as in Singapore, the theatre was dominated by the British, and local English-language playwriting did not take off until the mid-1960s, when it showed considerable activity. Robert Yeo noted in 1974 that Malaysia had "half-a-dozen playwrights with an output of some 25 full-length plays" (qtd. in W. J. Tan). Not only was playwriting taking off, several theatre companies were formed by people who to this day remain active in the theatre, and there was even enough material for the staging of a few drama festivals. Malaysian English-language theatre in the 1960s and 1970s had, it appeared, a stronger identity than did its Singapore counterpart. However, Malaysian theatre also faltered in the 1970s, making a recovery only in the mid-1980s. The trauma of the 1969 riots and the subsequent uncertainty felt by many Malaysians of immigrant origin was compounded by the institution of the National Language and Cultural policies. These policies effectively marginalised literatures written in any language other than the national language. Writers who had emerged from the struggle
for independence with such high hopes of producing an inclusive, hybrid Malaysian
culture, found themselves defeated by the refusal to acknowledge the centrality of their
works to the national identity.

All three plays considered here work within the confines of racial and cultural
boxes, but suggest ways of opening these boxes up, creating new formations. These
three plays represent ultimately doomed attempts to perform the national identity as
unified rather than communal, hybrid rather than essentialised. Written by members of
minority races in a non-official language, these plays capture a spirit that rises above
communalism. Sadly, race and division are also re-entrenched in all three plays, a
reflection of the normalisation of racial discourse within the Malaysian psyche.

_A Tiger is Loose in Our Community_

Reviewing the 1995 Kuala Lumpur production of _Tiger_, Martin Spice found it
to be still relevant despite the long lapse between writing and revival. Questioning why
it has not been staged more often since it was written, he suggests that: “Perhaps we no
longer want to acknowledge class and racial divisions and feel more comfortable in
choosing the more anodyne or safely foreign” (“College Play”). Writing nearly thirty
years after Dorall wrote the play, Spice is clearly exercised by the same problems
which presented themselves to Dorall: class and race remain the most divisive elements
in Malaysian society.

Tiger Chan is a young gangster living in a squatter settlement in Kuala Lumpur. His sister Helen is going out with a young middle-class Eurasian man, Philip Reade. Tiger also has a younger brother, San Fan, who is still at school and is friends with the simpleton Kali. Tiger is widely hated and despised. His eventual death is engineered by other inhabitants of the squatter settlement, leaving his brother and sister trapped in a society which functions by division and mistrust. Identities are constituted as stereotyped, recalling Bhabha’s contention that the colonisers used the stereotype as a tool to quell their anxiety about ‘almost but not quite’ natives who threatened to cross the border into their enclosures (_Location_ 86). Here, the stereotype functions to keep members of each class in the ‘place’ which has been assigned to them by society.
In *Tiger*, Dorall questions the possibility of producing a coherent identity from this morass of tension and separation. How, if conventions about class and race remaining separate have been absorbed, is a more unified, more open society to come into being? Dorall creates a complex and layered network of relationships through which he is able to explore the intricacies of class and race relations in post-independence Malaysia. The characters in this play fall into a number of multi-racial groups: of Tiger's two gang members, for example, one is Chinese and one is Indian. San Fan has a mixed group of Indian, Chinese and Malay friends. The men who sit and play cards together are Indian, Chinese and Malay. Philip's father is Eurasian, his mother Chinese. This mixing of races at first glance suggests an easy camaraderie between the various ethnic groups; however the play soon shows how thin that surface really is. Given the events of 1969, Dorall's play seems prescient, sensitive to the tensions and violence lying ready to flare up.

Social stratification is more immediately obvious along class rather than race lines. The inhabitants of the squatter settlement are all members of the working class. Philip's family is upper middle-class; they employ a servant or *amah*. The *amah* introduces another subtle wrinkle into the fabric of the social structure. Ostensibly working class, she feels no sympathy or kinship with Tiger and his siblings, looking down on them instead as unwelcome intruders into the exclusive domain of the Reades. Although she, like the Chans, is Chinese, she actively refuses to identify with them through race or class, unwilling to see any similarities in their situations. Rather, she identifies herself with the Reades; to the Reades, however, she is simply the domestic servant and they feel no kinship with her. The tendency to relate along class rather than racial lines can also be observed in Mrs. Reade, who is Chinese but does not see that as a point of similarity between herself, the Amah and the Chan siblings.

Class is clearly a line of schism in Malaysian society as represented by the play. Philip is the only one to cross that line by forming a relationship with Helen. He seems to do so, however, in order to be able to gather materials for his writing. He wants to write novels "[f]or people to learn from [...]. To realize what's wrong with the world" (*Tiger* 46). Yet his privileged background and a rather superficial attitude to what he sees around him mean that he cannot fully engage with the problems of his society. He
believes that he understands how “under-privileged people” feel because “I’ve met them. I see where they live. Talk to them” (Tiger 14). And yet when Tiger throws the reality of slum life in his face, saying “[h]ave you been in our bathrooms? You know some of us haven’t got any?,” Philip’s only response is “[d]on’t be crude” (Tiger 14). He moves between the two worlds, but remains an outsider in the world of the squatter settlement.

The attitude of the school authorities towards Tiger highlights the entrenchment of class separation in this society. Tiger is an obviously bright young man (which is more than can be said for Philip, who has barely scraped through his HSC examinations, and whose father has to secretly ‘buy’ a job for him). When Tiger first appears, he speaks to San Fan in basilectal Malaysian English; when he speaks to Philip, however, his English is of roughly the same standard as Philip’s. He has read Philip’s published story, and is able to state his opinion of it forcefully and clearly. Yet he has been expelled from school. He asks Philip: “When we all got caught, why was I the only one to be kicked out? Why me?” (Tiger 12). It is clearly a matter of class.

Yet even within classes, there is no unity as race remains a divisive factor. There is, for example, no sense of community in the squatter settlement. The cardplayers (Pillai, Hashim, Low and Siew) are united only in their fear and hatred of Tiger and his gang. The argument between Pillai and Hashim (Tiger 19) could be dismissed as just a clash of personalities. However, given Dorall’s very careful delineation of the racial makeup of the group, this is unlikely. He does not, for example, create an argument between the two Chinese men. Rather, he focuses on a clash between the Indian and the Malay.

We can look at the squatter settlement as a microcosm of Malaysian society, in the same way that in AYT the students in London represent Singapore as a whole. Where Yeo depicted Singapore as a predominantly Chinese nation, Dorall is careful to represent all the races in Malaysia, including the usually forgotten Eurasian minority. However in doing so, he highlights the disunity rather than the unity in this society, showing that official formulations of the national identity have produced a society.

24 Higher School Certificate examinations; good results in these examinations could lead to entry into university.
which is governed by schisms and differences. The official national identity is a tool of separation rather than union. There is a sense of several imagined communities rather than one. Given the level of suspicion, resentment and division in Malaysian society, as exemplified in Tiger, what scope is there for the production of a united and uniting Malaysian identity? Dorall provides an alternative to the designated identity in the utopian visions of the simpleton Kali.

While all the squatters are marginalised by their socio-economic position on the fringes of an increasingly prosperous society (represented by the comfort of the Reade’s home), Kali (an Indian boy) is the most severely marginalised. He is pushed to the outer edges of society not just by his poverty and his race, but also by his mental condition. Dorall portrays him as a gentle visionary, but shows that he is perceived by the other squatters as stupid and a nuisance, hovering on the borders of insanity. Dorall also shows that whatever its roots, hostility towards Kali is expressed in racist terms: Tiger tells San Fan that Kali looks “like a monkey” (Tiger 10); when Kali accidentally knocks a Chinese woman off her bicycle, she calls him “[d]irty Indian” (Tiger 27), while another Chinese man declares that “[e]very time Indian make trouble” (Tiger 29).

San Fan’s steadfast defence of Kali in the face of considerable hostility is laudable. Theirs is the only relationship in the squatter settlement based on pure friendship. Their friendship suggests the possibility of forming relationships in which race is not the central element. While there are other mixed-race relationships portrayed in this play, they are power relationships (as in Tiger’s gang) rather than friendships. The mixed-race group of card players can hardly be called friends. While Helen and Philip should ideally represent a portrait of hope, crossing borders of race and class in their relationship, Philip’s shallowness and his deep-seated inability to really step beyond the boundaries of his class mean that their romance is unlikely to go any further. Mr. and Mrs. Reade have a mixed-race marriage, but Mrs. Reade’s responses to Helen indicate that she has distanced herself to some extent from others of her ‘own’ race.

Dorall portrays a cross-racial grouping in each generational level: the card players, Tiger and his gang, Helen and Philip, San Fan and Kali. Significantly, it is only
the relationship between the two youngest, San Fan and Kali, that is based purely on mutual liking and understanding. This suggests that there is hope, as successive generations are born in Malaysia, that they too will be able to form such relationships. Unfortunately, the friendship between San Fan and Kali is threatened by Tiger, who does not like the simpleton, and by the card players, who want to use Kali to get rid of Tiger. In fact, each interracial relationship here is threatened by the previous generation: Philip’s parents disapprove of Helen, Tiger dislikes Kali. As long as old ideas, as represented by previous generations, still prevail, then the kind of racially transcendent friendship represented by Kali and San Fan cannot survive.

The only world in which non-communal identities prevail exists purely in Kali’s mind. When he looks into the squatter settlement’s well, he sees visions of a world filled with fruit trees and animals. In a story reminiscent of the Biblical reference to the time when the lion will lie down with the lamb, Kali tells San Fan that in the world of the well, the tiger and the goat declare their love for each other (Tiger 33). Mentally, Kali inhabits a space in which difference is acknowledged, but is neither highlighted as the main identifier of the individual nor foregrounded as a basis for suspicion, distrust and distance. Rather, Kali’s world opens up possibilities of hybrid interaction.

Tiger, also a marginal man, is half attracted by Kali’s vision. There are suggestions that Tiger’s identity as a gangster has been performatively created for him. He states that: “In school they already called me gangster” (Tiger 52); with the authority figures in his life constantly reacting to him as if he is a criminal, he takes on that persona, becoming the leader of a gang so that no one will push him around. Yet he wants something else; looking into the well, trying to see what Kali sees, he wonders about the possibility of starting a new life. A settled, non-criminal life would allow him to produce an alternative identity to the one he now has. But finally he sees nothing in the well except water (Tiger 66 - 67).

In the end, all alternative visions are destroyed, and society falls back into authority-defined identities based on division and difference. Tiger and Kali both die, and San Fan takes Tiger’s place. He has his gang around him, but they no longer play childish card games. Instead, San Fan beats up and subdues Hoong Tan, turning him into his first victim. His hesitant understanding of Kali’s visions and his joy in such
innocent pursuits as frog-catching disappear, to be replaced by the identity he now takes on as gang leader: "Aware of the new responsibility he now stands tall and proud" (Tiger 81). This pride in his new identity and his triumph over Hoong Tan are undermined by the song being sung in the background, which bids a gleeful farewell to the dead Tiger, and casts a pall over San Fan's new position. Is he going to share the same fate as Tiger? Alternative identities are explored but in the end, do not survive the force of entrenched ideas of class and race.

Dorall's handling of language hints at the development of an overarching, non-racial identity which is denied in the text of his plays. He is one of the first Malaysian playwrights to use Malaysian English with a fair degree of success and yet, as Irene Wong notes, his audiences were appalled by the language: "The general opinion was that this sort of English was not 'respectable'. Besides, it would make Malaysian plays incomprehensible to audiences overseas" (101). Leaving aside the cultural cringe which demands that Malaysian plays must conform to some sort of international (read Western) standard, we are left with the assertion that the language actually used by many Malaysians to express themselves is by definition substandard. Dorall's response was to assert the truth of the language, declaring that: "Whatever disadvantages of communication broken English may have, it is at least genuine, whereas standard English which is spoken by very few people in this country, can only be colourless, unnatural, and, therefore, false" (qtd. in I. Wong 101). He was aware, then, of a shared language used by the people, which suggests the forging of ties at the grassroots level. Despite the lack of official recognition, then, there was some underlying sense of a shared identity.

Irene Wong notes that shortly after this, "general attitudes to this variety of English began to change, though very slowly" (101), suggesting that the fledgling identity which Dorall had tried to capture, was now becoming more firmly entrenched. By the 1980s, when the next flowering of Malaysian playwriting took place, the use of Malaysian English in locally-written English plays was taken for granted, on the assumption that the use of Standard British English would not reflect the Malaysian identity.
In contrast to the bleak ending of Dorall’s *Tiger*, K. Das’s *Lela Mayang* represents a moment of joyous and hopeful collaboration. Originally written for television in Bahasa Malaysia by Raja Ismail Iskandar, the script was translated into English by Adibah Amin, before being restructured and adapted for the stage by K. Das, thus making the resulting script a truly collaborative affair – a comment which could also be applied to the actual staging of the play.

*Lela* was the first Malaysian play to be staged by the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group (MATG). The MATG (known before 1967 as the Malayan Arts Theatre Group) had been run entirely by expatriates and its emphasis was on English and European theatre, with primarily expatriate participation. But in 1967 the MATG was, for the first time, completely controlled by Malaysians; the group’s name was duly changed from “Malayan” to “Malaysian,” and the constitution stated that the main objective of the group was to “develop a Malaysian theatre” (MATG 2). This clearly stated objective contrasts with the isolation in which Singaporean playwrights worked (Seet, “Singapore Drama” 85); it gave writers a positive goal to work towards, while Singaporean writers were working unguided.

*Lela* was the MATG’s first move in the direction of encouraging local writers, actors, and technicians. In his Author’s Note, Das describes *Lela* as “an experiment not only to test the capacity of our own people to get a production through without outside help, but also to see if we could appeal to our multi-racial society” (84). The process of staging this play indicated an awareness of the need to address the fact of multiracialism. The play and its staging thus represent a conscious attempt to create something that would be able to cut across borders of race. Yet it does so within the limits of Malay culture; it is significant that the MATG made the decision to present ‘Malaysian’ culture using Malay culture as a vehicle several years before the National Cultural Policy was articulated. The decision suggests an underlying awareness of the political dominance of the Malay culture, which is subtly countered by the method by which it is presented. Re-presenting culture here stands as a means of affirming individual agency and choice.
Aihwa Ong asserts that the articulation of culture is linked to power: "A common ethnographic assumption holds that speaking subjects are unproblematic representers of their own culture, whereas I argue that their truth claims [...] are articulated in webs of power. Indeed, answering the question, Who owns culture? (and articulating its particular truths) is an open-ended contestory process" (80). Leong Wai Teng puts forward a similar question, also linking culture and power: "Which group is able to impose its version of the past on other groups and why?" (515). The Malays, as the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, are constructed as representing the culture of Malaysia; thus despite the freedom of other ethnic groups to continue practising different cultures, Malay dominance and power are re-asserted. Because the question of who owns culture is removed from the domain of public discussion in Malaysia, negotiations with the question must come through the private avenues afforded by, for example, theatre. The theatre is able to put forward an alternative national narrative, contesting authoritative impositions of tradition and the past.

While the plot of *Lela* is firmly based in Malay culture and folklore, the staging of it inhabits a more ambiguous, liminal space; where official formulations of Malaysian culture are based on division and difference, this play reaches towards a more hybrid and inclusive culture. Das and director Syed Alwi work within the borders of fixed identifications, but try also to cross these boundaries through innovative staging practices. There is a willingness to mix, experiment and compromise; by the time Lee Joo For wrote *The Happening in the Bungalow* in 1970, that willingness had hardened into distrust, and division had become more deeply ingrained.

*Lela* is based on an old Malay tale about thwarted love, revenge, and death. Lela and Mayang are in love, but Mayang is forced to accept the marriage proposal of an old man, Dato Chadang. There follows a sequence of misunderstanding, killing and revenge-taking which ends, inevitably, with the deaths of Lela and Mayang. K. Das did not make major changes to the story except to include the character of Hamid, the blind man who, Tiresias-like, sees all. He has a choric function within the play, commenting on and criticising the action. Lloyd Fernando states that "by introducing the blind Hamid who is both commentator and participant in the action [Das] has fitted his tale into a perspective critical of the events and characters portrayed, and in keeping with
our modern temper." He sees the play as a fine example of how the "riches of history" may be adapted to the modern context ("Introduction" xv).

Fernando’s point about adapting history to the modern context warrants consideration in the context of the constitution of alternative identities. The government had stated that the national identity was to have Malay culture and language as its base; each officially-defined culture was then left to develop in its own enclave. The position of writers in English was even more isolated. Margaret Yong points out that "Malaysian drama in English functioned in a double cocoon. It had sealed itself from political reality and also from the question of interaction with the other theatre traditions that in fact make up the cultural backgrounds of the peoples of Malaysia" (237). Wong Phui Nam’s comment on the Malaysian writer in English suggests an even deeper isolation than is suggested by Yong, brought about by "an absence, even at their very beginnings, of cultural and spiritual resources carried over from a ‘mother’ culture relevant to the sustaining of a vital communal life in the new land" (169). Fernando echoes the concerns of Yong and Wong about the isolation of English-language writing, and suggests a solution towards which Yong also points, namely the recovery of tradition: "The first thing was to draw on tradition. Modern English-speaking Malaysians are modern enough: the trouble is they have forgotten their own rich and varied heritage" ("Introduction" xiv).

In order to find an alternative theatrical identity, rather than the inherited colonial identity which still valued "Shakespeare, Wilde, Coward, and Shaw" above all else (Das, "Author’s Note" 84), there was a need to not only rediscover tradition and heritage, but also to rework and adapt it to the modern context. In doing so, the MATG was also tentatively producing a Malaysian identity that provided an alternative to the communal identities that were then the everyday reality.

Much of the debate on the search for a Malaysian literary identity centred on the problems of using Malaysian English which, as Irene Wong points out, was "not considered a suitable vehicle for any ‘serious’ use of language" (99). Lela, however, has begun the process of moving the search for a localised idiom away from the purely

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25 These comments were echoed in 2001 by Kuo Pao Kun’s description of Singapore as a "cultural orphan" (Kuo, "Interview" 117).
linguistic, towards one that encompasses music, movement, visuals, and so on. In these areas there was a definite move away from the canonical. The music, for example, was composed for "piano and aboriginal nose flutes" (Das, "Author's Note" 85), a fascinating mix of Western and traditional. It is interesting that the composer, Jimmy Boyle, did not turn to any of the more easily accessible Asian instruments, especially the Malay instruments which would have fit quite naturally with the Malay story. He instead created a hybrid kind of music which, while not privileging any of the three main races of Malaysia, was nonetheless undeniably Malaysian.

The set design also transgressed received notions. The stage directions specify a realistic kampung (village) scene, with houses and trees clearly visible. Set designer Syed Ahmad Jamal produced two designs, "one realistic and the other [...] beautiful and crazy and impossible and exciting" (Das, "Author's Note" 84). The latter design was selected. One newspaper report calls the set design "symbolical:" "a house was no longer a house recognisable as such, having given way to a large symbolic heart" (C. G. Ooi). This abstract, symbolic set could overcome the cultural specificity of the Malay kampung setting, creating a more open and inclusive landscape. Knowing the story to be a traditional Malay one, and therefore likely to take place in a traditional, recognisable kampung setting, the audience would have been surprised by the symbolic, culturally non-specific set. The visual impact of the set would have demanded re-thinking and re-negotiation of set ideas about culture as fixed and unchanging. The MATG thus pointed to the possibilities of an inclusive Malaysian identity. While acknowledging the primacy of the Malay culture, they reworked it in such a way that it did not become exclusionary.

The use of English did create some problems. Looking back on the experience of playing the part of Lela, Malay actor Rahim Razali admitted to feeling "that the language was incongruous with the whole situation. I had to go through motions which were Malay, but I had to mouth them in a foreign language" (qtd. in Ishak 23). However, Das has attempted to make this foreign language less foreign. He has not resorted to using Malaysian English in the same was as does Dorall; this would have been inappropriate, given that the characters in Lela should be presumed to be speaking Malay, and speaking it well. Das therefore uses a poetic idiom that recalls the
traditional sources of the story. The resultant language is not racially specific; it does not require a particular accent. In Tiger, although Pillai’s use of English does not appear that different from anyone else’s on the page, in performance there would have to be a difference in accents; Pillai’s, for example, would have to be more Indian-accented, Tiger’s more Chinese-accented. The language of Lela makes no such demands, again allowing for more openness and inclusiveness.

This could, however, be undermined to some extent by the physical bodies of the actors. Lela and Mayang, for example, were played by Rahim Razali and Faridah Merican, both Malays. Their racially-marked bodies and their more Malay-accented English could threaten to re-establish Malay hegemony. The producers of the play avoided this, however, by casting an eclectic mix of Indians, Eurasians, Indigenes, Chinese and Malays as the other Malay characters. The actors physically embody the mix and organic hybridity of the Malaysian population, thus challenging the culturally-Malay text which they are staging.

Language is marshalled towards the development of an open identity. The metaphors Das uses are rooted in the landscape of tropical Malaya:

MAYANG [refusing to be interrupted]: When you return, you talk of love. And your words are sweet. They flow, eddying and swirling like mud in the estuary, and I sit filled with wonder at the wonderful designs that change their colours and mingle with the sea. (Lela 90)

Das is thus able to frame the lives of his characters within a very specific local landscape, and does so without having to resort to a racially divisive idiom. The language of the landscape is open to all. However, he does attempt to translate Malay proverbs into English, and in this he is less successful. For example, Lela is warned that “a cucumber is not safe when the durian moves” (Lela 95), which sounds laboured and peculiar in English and also does not immediately call to mind any common Malay proverb from which it might have been translated. We can say that the language Das uses is Malaysian English in so far as it expresses Malaysian concerns and feelings, but the occasional awkwardness indicates the unsettled position of English in Malaysia. To Rahim Razali, it was still a foreign language, incapable of adequately encompassing
the local experience, an opinion borne out by some of Das’s more infelicitous efforts, as well as by the occasional stumblings and inconsistencies found in Dorall’s and Lee Joo For’s works.

The ambivalent position of the English language is evident in the contrast between Razali’s rejection of the possibility of using English to express his Malay experience, and K. S. Maniam’s belief that in the post-war years English “had helped to bring the various races together” (qtd. in I. Wong 97), at least among the middle classes. The popular and widespread use of English among the English-educated middle classes at the time is underscored by Syed Alwi’s explanation of why MATG chose to stage Lela in English: “we were trying to make a gradual change, and did not dare break out immediately” (Rowland, “Voicing” 2). The movement towards a non-English language Malaysian theatre was seen as a distant goal; this theatre would need to be developed slowly, and in the process would achieve an organically hybrid quality. But the process was derailed by the events of May 1969 and the racial polarisation which developed as a result. The loss of optimism following the race riots is reflected in Lee Joo For’s The Happening in the Bungalow, which appears to celebrate multiracialism and equality, but which carries an underlying tone of despair.

The Happening in the Bungalow

In Lee’s Happening we see the effects the race riots had on the desire to produce a national Malaysian identity that is not constituted as primarily racial. Lee’s text actively promotes discarding racial barriers and moving instead towards an identity which is constructed purely as ‘Malaysian’ rather than, for example, ‘Malaysian-Chinese’ or ‘Malaysian-Indian.’ The subtext, however, is of violence; the play offers a bleak vision of hesitant, fragile cross-racial understanding threatened by overwhelming hatred and bloodlust.

Lee uses a historical event from nineteenth-century Malaya as a starting point from which he goes on to explore post-independence constructions of nationalism and identity. He uses the three main characters to provide contemporaneous but divergent views of a particular historical incident; through these divergent views he is able to suggest an alternative view of the present. However his own experience of recent
history, namely the 1969 riots, precludes him from viewing this alternative as truly viable. It is threatened by the violence latent in society.

Birch, an English businessman in Malaysia, threatens to kill his Malay secretary Rozni and his Chinese neighbour Cheng in revenge for the 1875 assassination of J. W. W. Birch, the first British Resident to the state of Perak. The Perak Malays resented Birch’s intrusion into their affairs, specifically the matter of debt-slavery; they considered him to be trespassing on ground that was not open to him. According to Andaya and Andaya: “Popular interpretations of [Birch’s] death have seen it as an outburst against British authority, the first stirrings of an incipient nationalism” (166). In *Happening* Lee juxtaposes Birch’s assassination with the race riots of 1969. By yoking together these two significant historical incidents, Lee attempts to comment on and explore ideas of national identity and race, asking what has happened to the national identity now that considerations of race, culture and religion have been defined and assigned positions in a hierarchy of identities. Is it at all possible, given the way in which the fabric of society has been re-woven in response to the riots, to develop a non-racial, unified Malaysian identity?

Lee centralises race, turning it into the most significant marker of identity. The whole premise of Birch’s actions, for example, is based on race. He is not actually related to J. W. W. Birch, but states that: “He was a Birch, I am a Birch. The relationship is sufficiently significant” (*Happening* 117). He, as an Englishman, must avenge the colonialist Birch’s murder, and his chosen victims are a Malay (to represent the Maharaja Lela, the main conspirator in the assassination) and a Chinese, to represent the Chinese Towkay Cheng, who “did not lift a finger to save the noble British Resident Birch” (*Happening* 129). By focusing so sharply on race, Lee reflects its increased significance in shaping Malaysian society; in neither of the other two Malaysian plays is race turned into the central premise of the plot. Even in Dorall’s play, which also deals with a multiracial cast of characters, the main dividing lines are based on class rather than race. Lee, however, must deal with the new emphasis on race.

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26 The next chapter will deal with another treatment of the same event, through Kee Thuan Chye’s *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch.*

27 Towkay is a term used to indicate a leader in the Chinese community.
Lee examines two versions of the Malaysian identity; the racially divided official version, and the grassroots version which reaches after hybridity, crossing racial borders. He does this through the interaction between Birch and the two Malaysians. He sets up a dichotomy between Birch on the one hand, and Cheng and Rozni on the other. It is easy to read this as a coloniser/colonised dichotomy. Birch is figured as neo-colonial, supporting J. W. W. Birch's decisions to override local customs, declaring that: "If it had not been for his courageous combat against native superstitions, folklore and sentimentalities, [...] the modern Malaya would not have arisen" (Happening 118). The coloniser/colonised relationship is also suggested by the power he has over Rozni and his houseboy, keeping the former in his house against her will, and ordering the latter to come and go at his whim. However, Rozni refutes the power Birch appears to have over her by asserting that: "This is no longer the country of the British colonialist overlord. This is Malaysia, born free for Malaysians and kept free by Malaysians" (Happening 116). The presence of Cheng also destabilises Birch's dominant position; Cheng is a planter rather than an estate labourer, which puts him on an equal social footing with Birch. When Birch proposes a toast "[t]o Western supremacy in all things," Cheng refuses to drink, angrily flinging his glass into a corner instead (Happening 134). Rozni and Cheng can therefore be seen as Malaysians challenging colonial hegemony, asserting a Malaysian identity which does not bow to the dominance of the former colonisers.

However, it is also possible to see a connection between Birch and the authorities in Malaysia. For example, he espouses colonial ideas of race, continually foregrounding racial demarcation in a way that homogenises difference, turning one Malay woman and one Chinese man into representatives of long dead figures purely because of race. While racial separation and the homogenisation of disparate ethnic groups into undifferentiated members of a 'race' are part of the legacy of the British colonisers, the post-independence government has maintained and reinforced policies of racial division. Birch, then, can also be read as a symbol of contemporary authority in Malaysia.

Birch's racially divisive view of the Malaysian identity can, therefore, be seen as representing the authoritative view. Lee suggests that Malaysians should overcome
the emphasis on division. Birch seems unable to do this, still viewing himself as a member of the divisive colonising authoritative forces. His is the hegemonic voice that marginalises alternative voices by reducing and essentialising them. In the same way, the post-1969 government felt the need to cling to racial definition and separation as a means of controlling inter-communal violence by officially establishing the 'place' of each racial group in the state hierarchy. The effect of this was to militate against the possibility of the formation of a racially transcendent Malaysian identity. The official national identity could only be based on officially-constituted races.

Lee examines this authority-defined, racially-based identity and, through Rozni and Cheng, rejects it. Rozni, for example, tries to focus on commitment to Malaysia, rather than racial demarcation, as a means of forging unity:

ROZNI: Oh – Birch! Cheng! Stop this racial baiting! Cheng, your family has been three generations in Malaya. Birch, you have just become a Malaysian citizen. Let's live and love together. (Happening 128).

The events of 1969 caused many non-Malays to question whether their race would ever allow them to be fully accepted in Malaysia, and many left to settle overseas. Their perception of their place within the country, and of their participation in the national identity, was of uncertainty and lack of belonging. In this play, however, Lee does not problematise the tenuous position of non-Malays in Malaysia in the wake of post-1969 nation-building programs and ideologies. Rather, he presents their position as a given, in an incongruously positive manner. Rozni states that Cheng's family has been in Malaya for three generations, and that Birch is a Malaysian citizen; therefore, they are unquestionably Malaysian. By ignoring the problems of perception that undoubtedly exist (for example, that only the Malays are regarded as indigenous, despite the fact that many Indians and Chinese have been settled in Malaysia for generations), Lee seriously weakens his play. He constructs an identity that seeks to transcend racial barriers, but such an identity cannot be normalised when everyday transactions focus on the divisions between races.
At the end of the play, Rozni and Cheng declare their love for each other, overcoming questions of race. Lee briefly acknowledges that inter-racial and inter-religious marriages can face complex problems:

ROZNI: [...] But, Cheng, seriously...you're Chinese, and I'm Malay...there'll be thousands of problems –

CHENG: Even if there are millions I'll marry them all together with you! (Happening 142)

But by blithely skimming over this problem rather than taking it further, Lee again weakens the potential strength of this play. However, Lee is well aware of the latent violence within society, threatening such moments of intersection. The optimistic stance taken by Cheng and Rozni is overshadowed by the mobs outside, shouting slogans of hatred: “kill – kill – kill the other kind of people!” (Happening 143).

Perhaps because the 1969 riots were so fresh in his memory, Lee has managed to evoke the atmosphere of blind hatred for “the other kind of people” lurking just outside the safe confines of the bungalow. The mobs are not identified racially; it is thus difficult to impute the violence to any particular group. Rather, Lee implicitly accuses Malaysian society in general for its suspicion and mistrust of anyone who can be defined as “other.” It is the calls for blood and death that provide the most authentic and believable voice in this play. Thus the only identity which emerges convincingly from this play is a violent and bloody one.

In scene two, Rozni articulates her understanding of what a Malaysian writer should do; she states that she will help Cheng get his stories published because his stories “are all about Malaysia and Malaysians – their virtues, their idiosyncracies, their frustrations, their hopes” (Happening 122). Lee, however, has not quite managed to do this in his own work. Authenticity of voice is a large part of the problem. Lee is not an accomplished playwright, seeming to prefer indulging in verbal and philosophical flights of fancy than in any serious consideration of characterisation, language and so on.²⁸ In this play, Birch, Cheng and Rozni have no authenticity of voice. Their voices are largely undifferentiated in terms of idiom and accent, factors which, in Malaysian

²⁸ See, for example, his Author's Note, which seems to eschew any notions of discipline in favour of
society, help to define and identify people. Cheng, for example, tells Rozni that men walking through two nearby villages have been “coshed” (*Happening* 125), a peculiarly British term which never gained currency among English-speaking Malaysians. Rozni, meanwhile, admonishes Birch for drinking whisky or “fire-water as the natives call it” (*Happening* 113). Because Lee uses colonialist discourse (“natives”) and the slang of cowboy movies (“fire-water”), Rozni seems to be distancing herself from other Malaysians, placing herself in a position of greater power, or higher social standing. Touches like this undermine the position of Cheng and Rozni as being symbolic of a Malaysian identity.

It is unrealistic and unconvincing to equip such supposedly Malaysian characters as Rozni and Cheng with a variety of English which is virtually indistinguishable from that of the Englishman Birch. Dorall made a similar point in his note on the dialogue of *Tiger*, stating that not to use “the, actual rhythms and mannerisms of the people can only be unrealistic, therefore false” (“Note”). Giving such similar rhythms, idiom and intonations to three racially diverse people may be a stratagem on Lee’s part to eradicate the lines along which divisions in Malaysia are traditionally drawn, but such a superficial and summary ‘eradication’ is simplistic and unconvincing.

The linguistic identity is part of the emergent Malaysian identity. While it is still possible to distinguish between Malaysian speakers of English according to race, it is also important to note that they can be distinguished from English speakers from, for example, India and China (and even, nowadays, Singapore). Malaysian English does therefore represent a marker of Malaysian identity. As Dorall affirms, equipping Malaysians with Standard English is “colourless, unnatural and, therefore, false” (qtd. in I. Wong 101). We can conclude that by giving Rozni and Cheng this unnatural, unlikely speech, Lee has turned them into “false” and unconvincing characters who do not seem to embody a Malaysian identity. The only ‘Malaysian’ identity that seems to emerge is one of bloodshed, breakdown and violence.

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29. “Fire-water” is not a common term for alcohol in Malaysia.

30. In marking a difference between standard English and Malaysian English, Dorall was speaking in the context of the 1960s. Nowadays, it is possible to speak of standard Malaysian English, which is close to standard English but retains markers of Malaysian identity.
Conclusion

The four playwrights considered here have all, to differing extents, countered the hegemonic imposition of identity by the authorities. They have used the theatre as a "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity" (Bhabha, Location 4). Where official constructions of identity treat it as fixed and unchanging, made permanent by authoritative designation, the theatre is willing to negotiate with and challenge these designations, such that identity is in the process of production rather than fixed. Theatre has become, in Bhabha's words, a "stairwell" and as he points out, "the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Location 4). Public policy at the time tried to move towards the formation of identities polarised around questions of race, politics and culture. These plays, however, disrupt such polarities. The writers explore liminal spaces open to them and, by staging those spaces, open them up to a wider audience. The experience is thus extended beyond prescribed borders.

Finally, however, the voice of authority remains the strongest. Robert Yeo is constrained by the political climate of Singapore to foreground the mainstream point of view; his interrogation of it is quiet and subtle. Edward Dorall and Lee Joo For envision more utopian societies but portray these societies as being threatened by violence, so that, finally, racial separation and suspicion remain in place. The MATG production of Lela, so hopeful in its execution, was undermined by social and political events, as the riots of 1969 reinforced the disintegration of a fledgling theatre community into various disparate theatre streams.

The plays to be studied in the next chapter (Kuo Pao Kun's Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and Kee Thuan Chye's We Could **** You, Mr. Birch) represent a similar mix of optimistic and pessimistic development. The plays discussed in chapter one are marked by a strong uncertainty about Malaysian and Singaporean identities; these had to be produced, and the plays are involved in that process of production. The potential to help develop an integrated, unified identity was exciting, but the excitement was curtailed by political reality, which demanded the construction and imposition of divisive identities. Thus the optimism accompanying the birth of a new nation is undercut by the pessimism engendered by the application of authoritative
force in the service of political ends. In the next chapter, there is cause for celebration in that the national identity, so unclear in this chapter, is now to a great extent taken for granted. There is less questioning of what it means to be a Malaysian or Singaporean. However, this is offset by greater political dominance and control. State control has got progressively tighter and more draconian. This is reflected in the style in which both Kuo and Kee write. Their plays are critical of authority and of the identities which have developed as a result of authoritarian intervention, but the criticism now has to take the form of allegory.

Chapter one envisions the nation as the ideal; Yeo, Dorall, Lee, and Das do not question the need to form a Malaysian or Singaporean nation, though they do interrogate the means by which the authorities intend to form the nation. Chapter two sees the writers questioning the ideal. Again, this suggests the greater certainty of the national identity. Seet and Sankaran, citing Wole Soyinka's four-phase model for "the emergence of an indigenous literary tradition," state that Robert Yeo's plays "are located in stages three and four of the [...] model [...] and are therefore products of a more interrogative nature and critical intent" (8). I would suggest that this is also true of *Descendants* and *Birch*. There is now enough certainty about the national identity that it can be questioned; but the tighter controls put in place by the state mean that such questioning can only be oblique. The curtailing of freedom has lead to the pessimism of the earlier plays developing into cynicism and scepticism.
Chapter Two

Covert Subversion: Allegory in the Theatre: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and We Could **** You, Mr. Birch

On the twelfth of February 2004, Malaysian theatre group Five Arts Centre (FAC) and a large number of nervous ticket-holders, myself among them, heaved a collective sigh of relief as the theatre company received its licence to perform Huzir Sulaiman’s play Election Day. The play had been performed in Kuala Lumpur previously, with no apparent problems in the issuing of the licence. This time, however, the licensing authorities demanded numerous cuts and changes to the dialogue before the licence was issued; indeed, it was uncertain whether it would be issued at all, even after the changes had been made. Although it was never stated clearly what the problem was, it was difficult for observers to ignore the proximity of the General Elections, scheduled for March 2004. Election Day, written after, and in response to, the controversial 1999 elections,¹ was considered safe enough for performance in the aftermath of those elections, since they had been won by the Barisan Nasional. To stage the play just before another election may have been cutting things a little too close to the bone. It was no longer ‘safe.’

As illustrated by this incident, theatre practitioners in Malaysia have to walk a tightrope as they struggle to stage plays, always in danger of being knocked off their precarious perch by the sudden imposition of new rulings, by the unexpected use of censorship where it had not previously been deemed necessary, even by hasty responses to occasional expressions of outrage by isolated audience members. In Singapore too state censorship exerts a strong influence on writing and staging practices. This was visible, for example, in the difficulties faced by Robert Yeo in obtaining a licence to stage One Year Back Home, despite his privileged position at the time as chair of the Ministry of Culture’s Drama Advisory Committee (Yeo, “Interview” 32).

¹ This election took place very shortly after the sacking and detention of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The incident generated deep schisms in Malaysia’s social and political environment, and a serious threat to the BN hegemony was posed by the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front), an uneasy coalition of opposition parties led by Anwar’s wife Wan Azizah.
Given the unproblematic (from a bureaucratic point of view) staging of *Are You There, Singapore?*, or indeed the relative ease with which FAC managed to get a licence for the first performance of *Election Day*, it appears that censorship laws in Malaysia and Singapore are uncertain and shifting, subject to bureaucratic and political vagaries. What cannot be denied is the increasingly strong presence, in both countries, of censorship in the theatre in the years since independence. This mirrors the ever more heavy-handed intervention of the state in social and cultural as well as political matters. The threat of racial unease and potential inter-racial violence, so real in the 1960s in both countries, still functions as a warning of what might happen (and indeed did happen in Kuala Lumpur, in March 2001)\(^2\) unless strong state control is exerted over expressions of opinion on race, religion and politics. Individual expressions which stray too far from the boundaries of what is ‘safe’ need, in this view, to be brought back under control. Hence, writing and performance which can be perceived as subversive or unsupportive of state discourse, or which deals too openly with ‘sensitive’ topics, is subject to censorship. And yet, the theatre continues to resist, to question, even to subvert, official pronouncements and discourses. As Tan Sooi Beng notes, despite censorship, “independent, alternative and oppositional performing arts groups continue to resist and challenge the state’s attempts to control them” (283). This chapter will attempt to examine how the theatre is able to resist and subvert state policy and censorship.

The plays to be analysed here are strikingly different in tone from those studied in the first chapter. In the heady aftermath of independence, as discussed in chapter one, Malaysia and Singapore still saw the nation as an ideal; while individuals may have questioned the particular paths to nationhood chosen by the state, there was less cynicism about the actual need to create a nation. Thus *Are You There?* and *Lela Mayang*, for example, demonstrated a certain optimism about the development of the nation. In the plays studied in the current chapter, however, the mood has turned to one of cynicism and a high degree of pessimism. If the playwrights of the 1970s saw the

\(^2\) Fatal racial clashes took place in Kampung Medan, a squatter area, over four days in March 2001. The clashes were sparked by an argument between an Indian and a Malay family, thus apparently supporting the state view that tension between the races was always lying uneasily dormant. There is an underlying belief, however, that the root cause of the tension was poverty and social deprivation, rather than inherent racial distrust. See Xavier Jayakumar, “The Kampung Medan Tragedy;” D. J. Muzaffar Tate, “Reflections on Kampung Medan;” and “New Hope Dawns in Kg. Medan.”
nation as an ideal, the writers of the 1990s, represented in this chapter, question and challenge that ideal. However increased levels of state dominance and the escalating role of censorship mean that the questions and challenges cannot be overt. What, then, are the methods used by these writers to present their dissenting and subversive views?

Both of the plays under consideration in this chapter are political in content, if not always in tone. Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (Descendants)*, an abstract, lyrical piece based loosely on the voyages of Admiral Zheng He,\(^3\) was performed in English by Singaporean group TheatreWorks, with Ong Keng Sen directing, at the Victoria Theatre, Singapore, in June 1995. It was then performed in Mandarin, at the same theatre, by The Theatre Practice in August 1995. The play won the Critic's Choice for Theatre, Singapore in 1995, and was restaged, in English, at the Victoria Theatre in 1996. This version was taken to the 1996 theatre festival in Cairo, where it won the Critic's Choice for Best Acting and gained a nomination from the International Jury for Best Staging. FAC staged the play in Kuala Lumpur at the Experimental Theatre in November 2000, directed by Chee Sek Thim.

Malaysian writer Kee Thuan Chye's play *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch (Birch)* is an energetic and sometimes comical reworking of the story of the assassination of the British colonial functionary J. W. W. Birch. The first performance was in June 1994 at the Experimental Theatre, *Kompleks Budaya Negara* (KBN, National Cultural Complex), Kuala Lumpur. It was restaged, due to popular demand, in December of the same year, at the same venue. *Birch* was also performed in Singapore, at the Festival of Asian Performing Arts in June 1995, at the invitation of the National Arts Council of Singapore. The playwright directed all these productions.

As I mentioned, the tone of the plays is not as political as the content. But – especially in the case of *Descendants* – even the content does not yield its political core easily, without a close and careful reading of text and performance. Both plays are allegorical, choosing to approach their controversial subjects through indirection, in response to the draconian censorship practices prevailing in both countries. Kee and

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\(^3\) Zheng He is the Romanised Mandarin version of Cheng Ho. Since the text specifies the Mandarin spelling, I will follow that convention.
Kuo use historical figures and events in these plays as a means of conveying their allegorical messages. I would argue that this is at least partly in response to the authoritative use of history to construct national identities, an idea which will be discussed at a later stage in the chapter. The state uses particular historical figures allegorically to reiterate specific points about the national identity. The playwrights respond by deconstructing authoritative narratives of nation. They use history as allegory to express views of the nation which challenge and disrupt official constructions.

Censorship and Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore

All public performances in Malaysia and Singapore have to be licensed by the relevant authorities. Licensing matters used to fall solely within the purview of the police; nowadays, there are licensing boards which, as a matter of course, invite various arts practitioners to participate. However, these boards are still controlled by the police – Singapore’s PELU (Public Entertainment Licensing Unit), for example, is under the command of the Criminal Investigation Department.\(^4\) Sadly, the inclusion of artists on decision-making panels has not led to the privileging of artistic over political concerns in the decisions to grant performance licenses. The main worry remains the expression of subversive, ‘dangerous’ or ‘sensitive’ topics.

Guidelines, such as they are, remain vague and generalised. It is therefore difficult for writers to gauge when their work might fall foul of censorship laws. For example, homosexuality is, ostensibly, a taboo subject in both countries. However, as William Peterson points out, the portrayal of homosexuality \textit{per se} is not actually forbidden. Rather, it is the normalisation of gay relationships which cannot be allowed; Peterson notes that in the eyes of the state, “once [gay male sexuality] is presented as normal or natural, it becomes objectionable” (\textit{Theater} 138). Negotiating these subtleties and uncertainties in the application of the censor’s blue pencil puts theatre practitioners in a precarious position, where they are almost entirely at the mercy of the licensing authorities.

\(^4\) For a more detailed discussion, see C. L. Ho, “Politics and the Arts.”
Rowland offers an insight into why the arts, generally dismissed as being peripheral to the core issues of survival and economic development in Malaysia and (until more recently) in Singapore, are nonetheless subject to such tight control and scrutiny: "When an arts event or art form becomes the subject of controversy and censure, it's inevitably a red flag for some deeper, wider issue effecting [sic] society" ("Thinking" 3). The authoritative desire is to halt the further discussion of this 'issue' before it begins to surface more widely in society. Foo Meng Liang, an administrator with Singapore’s National Arts Council (NAC), articulates a similar sentiment, declaring that the arts do have "social or moral implications; works of art can affect us, as individuals or as members of society in more ways than just in an aesthetic sense" (31). The arts, then, can be reflective of social unease, and can also influence individuals in social, moral, or political ways. The ability to halt the discussion of important issues speaks of one level of power. More significant is the agency the authorities appear to have to actually "define what is and what is not permissible in a society" (Rowland, “Thinking” 3); for example, by deeming race a sensitive topic and therefore not open to discussion except within approved boundaries, the authorities effectively cut individuals off from an issue that can be of deep personal significance.

Censorship represents the exertion of power and the continuation of an entrenched socio-political hegemony. Control of the theatre and its practitioners through censorship functions in two ways, the most obvious being the open exercising of power to allow or disallow licences or funding for particular performances. In July 2003, Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL, Kuala Lumpur City Hall) withdrew a performance licence issued to the Instant Café Theatre Company (ICTC), on the basis of one letter of complaint published in a local Malay-language newspaper ("Bolehwood Awards"). Going even further, DBKL then declared that performance licences would no longer be issued to ICTC. This decision caused considerable outrage and was quickly reversed by the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur, but subsequently a set of general guidelines was issued, declaring what did and did not constitute acceptable material for theatre performances. Predictably, the guidelines reinforced rules about ‘sensitive’ subjects.
In Singapore (in 1994), Haresh Sharma and Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage were accused in the *Straits Times* of subscribing to Marxist principles and using the theatre for possibly subversive purposes, because they had attended a Forum Theatre workshop in New York and subsequently used the method in some of their Theatre-in-Education projects. The rhetoric used in the newspapers is interesting, with Felix Soh’s article highlighting the “Marxist” nature of the New York workshop; another article speaks of schools being ‘targeted’ by this subversive new form (“Schools”), while then-Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo apparently saw the form as dangerous and potentially disruptive (“BG Yeo”). Funding for all Forum Theatre projects was instantly halted; the NAC declared its continued support for non-Forum Theatre projects, but with an underlying note of threat: they declared that The Necessary Stage’s “other projects can be considered” (“Sequence”), phrasing which manages to suggest that there is a strong possibility of refusal.

A more subtle form of control, one that functions in the realm of the subconscious, arises from the uncertainty writers face about what may or may not be considered taboo at any given moment. This uncertainty leads to a degree of self-censorship on the part of some writers, who second-guess the licensing authorities in order to make sure that their plays stand a better chance of being staged. Indeed, Kee Thuan Chye refers to self-censorship in a mockingly self-referential way in *Birch*, a point which will be studied in greater detail further on in this chapter. In Singapore, the Censorship Review Committee institutionalised self-censorship, while at the same time creating the appearance of greater openness and flexibility: in October 1992 it was announced that “established theatre companies need not have to go through the censorship mechanism involving the Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA) and Pelu.” Instead, they would merely submit their scripts to PELU “which will then only be concerned with the logistics of the performance like the venue” (Pandian, “Views”). This creates a situation in which these ‘privileged’ groups, in order to ensure that they do not lose their apparently more independent status, might regulate the content of their works, ensuring that they do not stray into controversial areas.

Theatre groups and writers may choose to accept the decisions of the licensing authorities on what can and cannot be staged, thus ceding power and agency to them.
This point also brings to the fore the vexed question of whether it is better to refuse cuts, and thus lose the chance of having the play staged, or to accede to the cuts and at least ensure that the play, albeit with much-diluted content, is seen by as wide an audience as possible. Just such a point was brought up in relation to the 2004 staging of Election Day. FAC decided to take on board the cuts and changes suggested by the authorities, in the interests of making sure that the play was staged. They attempted to undermine the efficacy of these cuts by photocopying the relevant pages from the script, enlarging them, and displaying them prominently in the foyer of the theatre, for the reference of the audience. For Rey Buono, this was not enough by way of protest; ultimately, he states, despite all their efforts at petitioning and complaining, FAC “did what they were told” (4). Because of their actions, he asks, “[h]ow many future playwrights will censor their own work before it even gets submitted to the authorities?” (4). While this is a valid question, there is also the possibility that refusal on the part of a particular group to cooperate, might result in more stringent supervision of all theatre groups. There can be no certainty, as long as censorship guidelines remain deliberately vague and open to interpretation by the authorities.

Thus the problem remains of how to deal with and work around the obstacles put in the theatre practitioner’s way by the censor, who works directly under the aegis of the state and therefore reflects its policies. It is pertinent at this point to examine allegory as a means of approaching particular issues via unexpected and therefore, perhaps, unsuspected and unregulated routes.

Allegory and History

The simplest examples of allegory would be stories such as Aesop’s Fables which, while apparently narrating events in the lives of various woodland creatures, are in fact instructing humans in moral ways to lead their lives. The allegory can be read on two levels: the simple, more obvious level of the story, taken at face value, and the ‘hidden’ level which contains the instructive or possibly subversive meaning behind the story. Angus Fletcher explains that allegorical works “are usually saying one thing in order to mean something beyond that one thing” (4). Because of the indirect method used to indicate the meaning “beyond,” that meaning might in fact be missed or ignored. It is because of this possibility that allegory “seems regularly to surface in
critical or polemical atmospheres, when for political or metaphysical reasons there is something that cannot be said" (Fineman 28). As Fletcher points out:

[…] we must avoid the notion that all people must see the double meaning, for the work to be rightly called allegory. At least one branch of allegory, the ironic aenigma, serves political and social purposes by the very fact that a reigning authority (as in a police state) does not see the secondary meaning of the "Aesop-language." But someone does see that meaning, and, once seen, it is felt strongly to be the final intention behind the primary meaning. (7 – 8)

In this case, allegory works precisely because it can be misread, or rather, ‘under’-read; an individual may well read too little into the work, and dismiss it as harmless. To add to the complexity, the authorities may choose to ignore the political dimension of an allegory: this implies that if they do not see anything ‘wrong’ with the work, perhaps there is nothing ‘wrong,’ and the play is after all just a simple story. Peterson makes this argument in relation to Descendants: “one could argue that by failing to acknowledge that Kuo’s play was in part an allegory about oppression, the government’s tacit sanctioning of this play diffused its political significance” (Theater 174).

It is important to remember that allegory can also be used by the authorities to reassert or to naturalise particular views and specific modes of behaviour. While critics and theorists in the late twentieth century “frequently tend to depict the ‘allegorical’ aspect of composition as primarily subversive or disjunctive in its operation” (Whitman, “Present” 300), this view does not take into account the propagandistic use that can be made of allegory. Fletcher, for example, notes that both “Communist Russia and China have praised the art of the ‘typical,’ by which they understand an art of stereotypes, in which the West is villainous, the East virtuous” (325); East and West are drawn in these allegories as antagonistic figures, emphasising the moral and political ‘rightness’ of the East. Such a system of representation assumes a particular stance (for example, ‘the East is virtuous’) and then reads all other events as supporting that stance. Stephen Slemon, examining the use of allegory in supporting the imperial project, states that “allegory […] proceeds by forging an identity between things, and it reads present events, whatever the signifying system in which they are found, as terms
within some already given system of textualised identification or codified knowledge” (7). Allegory can be used to manipulate the interpretation of events to reify the dominant discourse, thus leading eventually to the normalisation of that discourse. Through this process of normalisation, allegory can become “an instrument of universal conformity” (Fletcher 325), performatively constructing docile identities.

Importantly, however, as Fletcher goes on to point out, allegory “is also the chief weapon of satire” (325). This brings us back to the subversive potential of allegory. While the state produces allegorical figures which serve to further entrench state discourse, artists are able to construct ‘typical’ figures “who are deviations from the party line” (Fletcher 325). Kenneth Burke asserts that, under politically repressive regimes, “a younger generation of writers bred to the new situation,” that is, intimately familiar with the discourse of repression, will find “a new language of deployments and maneuvers, with sly sallies that have an implied weighting far in excess of their surface meanings” (230). He implies that allegory is a natural response to conditions which seek to limit individual expression; it creates a space for an alternate discourse.

In Descendants and Birch, the playwrights use historiography— that is, the writing of history—as a base from which to construct their allegories. The conjunction of historiography and allegory is significant because historiography can be seen as having performative power. It can reiterate and thus normalise particular views and discourses, thereby supporting the ‘hidden meaning’ that is suggested by the allegory. Whitman asserts that “allegory and history recurrently imply questions about each other. For the historical process has an indirect way of commenting in its turn upon those who aim to interpret it” (“Present” 303). This suggests that historiography in itself contains an element of allegory; interpreting a historical event leads to a second level of interpretation, namely commenting on its interpreters. The meaning of the historical event lies not only in the surface facts, but also in the way in which those facts are understood by particular people or institutions. This in turn suggests that interpretations of history can be manipulated and constructed to meet specific needs. It is, to some extent, a performative construct.

Postmodernists emphasise the idea of historiography as being performative, a view at odds with the traditional concept of history as a closed narrative, inarguable
and ‘true.’ Postmodern scholars of history note that this performativity arises, ironically, from its casting in the narrative mode, even though that mode purports to do nothing more than describe. Barthes has noted that history (as narrative rather than chronology) will inevitably contain a deictic level which points to the interpretive function of the historian: “In the fully formed (or, as we might say, ‘clothed’) historical discourse, the facts related function inevitably either as indices, or as core elements whose very succession has in itself an indexical value” (120). As soon as history progresses from being a chronicle (that is, a series of dates and events noted down) to being given some narrative form (that is, having structure and meaning), a level of individual interpretation begins to function. In this view, there is an external, conscious agency involved in the ordering of history in particular ways.

Hayden White expands on this view, calling historical narratives “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found.” ("Historical" 1712). White does not dispute the facticity of events – that a certain event took place on a certain date. What he chooses to emphasise is the level of manipulation and interpretation that takes place in including these events in a narrative structure. The meaning of particular events is constructed for readers through narrative which, in White’s view, “is not merely a neutral discursive form [...] but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (Content ix). Norman Wilson has suggested that history is “a continual, open-ended process of argument, which is constantly changing” (3); this suggests something open and flexible within history itself. White’s arguments, in contrast, point to the deliberate, external construction of historical narrative into specific forms; it is constantly changing because it is being changed.

The process of constructing historical narrative is particularly pertinent to postcolonial nations. History represents contentious ground for former colonies. Colonial constructions of history often caused pre-colonial and indigenous histories to ‘disappear’ so that, as pointed out by Gilbert and Tompkins, “a colony’s history frequently ‘began’ when the whites arrived” (106). The project of much post-colonial writing, then, was the recovery of pre-colonial and indigenous histories. By re-asserting pre-colonial history, colonised people were able to recover a past which affirmed an
existence apart from and independent of the colonisers. They were also able, through the resurrection of heroes and legendary figures, to create a heroic past to be proud of. These figures took on an allegorical role, representing the modern-day population, and by extension transferring their heroic qualities to them.

What, however, would happen to newly-formed states where there was no common, pre-colonial, racially-transcendent history on which to draw? In countries like Malaysia and Singapore, where cohesive nations had to be abruptly created from vastly disparate groups of people who had not been encouraged to develop any feelings of loyalty towards the country they inhabited, historical narrative could potentially be deployed in order to create cohesion. John Tosh states that: “The process of tradition-making is particularly clear in newly autonomous nations, where the need for a legitimizing past is strongly felt and the materials for a national past are often in short supply” (11). Where there is no long shared history (what Tosh calls “the materials for a national past”), can history be constructed to create that past? Gilbert speaks of her interest “not with constructions of history per se but with constructing the self in history” (5). How is history used in order to create identities? Here the final goal is not the history itself, but the identity that arises from that particular conception of history.

In the following analyses of Descendants and Birch, I will look at how Singapore and Malaysia have used history in order to construct “the self in history.” Historical figures and events were constructed in ways that highlighted their heroism, their success, and so on, in an attempt to create a heroic and worthy national identity. They symbolised the identity that the authorities sought to construct and inculcate in the population. However, the state’s allegorical use of these figures and of historical narrative can also be limiting to the individual, or can lead to the perpetuation of certain inequities. Singapore’s focus on the centrality of the Chinese to the development of the modern state, for example, marginalises Malay and Indian contributions; in Malaysia, the historiographic insistence on all Chinese and Indians as immigrants serves to devalue their importance to the nation. The two playwrights problematise state attempts at constructing allegory through history by re-creating ‘noble’ and ‘heroic’ historical figures as (for example) powerless, or comical, or venal. They thus challenge state constructions of the national identity. I would suggest that
their aim is not to help create an identity, as was to a large extent the case for the plays studied in chapter one. Rather, they seek to make the people look again, critically, at constructed identities which have been cited and re-cited by the authorities, thus opening them up to questions and to potential discursive failure, and through this failure, moving to a space of re-thinking and re-construction.

**Spiritual and Political Castration: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral**

Singapore was forced, somewhat unwillingly, to take on the status of independent nation in 1965. It then had to swiftly create a cohesive, uniting force with which to bind together an immensely disparate population. The state's answer was to focus on Singapore's current situation, that is, its vulnerability and lack of resources, implying that it was the duty of every citizen to work hard and make sacrifices in order to overcome these disadvantages. Singapore had to emphasise the importance, above all other considerations, of economic development. The focus was on present and future survival, leaving little room for contemplation of the distant past. To underscore this approach, little attention was paid to the history of pre-modern Singapore. The state chose, instead, to build on Singapore's colonial success as a trading post.

Subsequently, history has been deployed to help sharpen the focus on economic survival and pragmatism. Rahim notes that in 1997, "the Ministry of Education revealed that a new history syllabus with an emphasis on post-independence Singapore would be taught" (163). Out of the nine units on the syllabus for lower-secondary history, only three refer to the pre-colonial past; five units focus on the creation of modern Singapore, that is history post-Raffles. In the pre-colonial units, the emphasis is on arts, culture and society, rather than on politics and economics ("History Syllabus"). The pre-colonial, pre-modern history of Singapore serves only to provide a cultural basis for the modern Singaporean. The vibrant economy of the modern state is viewed as originating from the founding of Singapore as a trading post by the British. By emphasising modern history the state underlines the centrality of economic over cultural development to the authoritatively-constructed Singaporean identity.

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5 For details refer to introduction, p. 21, footnote 3.
Also significant are the historical icons chosen to represent Singapore's success; the two men most closely associated with Singapore's development and prosperity are Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, and Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first and longest-serving Prime Minister, and still a highly influential member of the Cabinet and ruling party. Little mention is made of the ancient figure of Sang Nila Utama, who gave the island its name. It is significant that both Raffles and Lee viewed Singapore's development in economic terms. Raffles saw Singapore as a strategic trading post from which to further enrich colonial coffers; Lee's primary motivation was the economic survival of the tiny new nation-state. It is possible, then, to see the two men as being in many ways analogous, the creators of this prosperous and safe nation. Singapore is thus represented allegorically by two men whose primary motivations were financial rather than (for example) cultural.

This singular focus by the authorities on issues of economic prosperity has resulted, inevitably, in "the cultural and material transformation of Singapore's population into a disciplined labour force whose everyday life is subjected to the logic of industrial economy" (Chua, Communitarian 20). Chua goes on to argue that "this pragmatism has [...] become a fleshed-out conceptual system" which not only "governs the regime's administrative policies and strategies [...] but] has also penetrated the consciousness of the population and has come to serve as the conceptual boundaries within which Singaporeans think through significant portions of their daily life" (Communitarian 68). Materialism became entrenched as central to the lives of most Singaporeans. As early as 1977, senior politician S. Rajaratnam referred to Singapore's most prominent value as "moneytheism" (qtd. in Milne and Mauzy 24). The focus, in the early years of developing the national identity, was on hard work and sacrifice in the service of future economic prosperity and success. So entrenched did the search for prosperity become that materialism and the desire for a comfortable life are now seen as being the hallmarks of the average Singaporean. The state openly deplores this situation, frequently complaining about the tendency of young Singaporeans to think only of themselves and their future pay packets, rather than of their responsibility to the nation; then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, speaking of Singaporean students

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6 Robert Yeo's play The Eye of History certainly makes the connections between the two men and Singapore's development, and also between the men themselves. For fuller discussions of this play, refer
studying overseas on government scholarships in 1999, noted that most of them wanted to know "how they could break their scholarship bonds instead of how and where they could serve on their return to Singapore" ("Singapore Tribe").

But it should be noted that it is only when the tendency toward materialism and individualism threatens to undermine state projects and authoritative discourse that it is officially condemned. It can be argued that the state has in fact fostered the desire for greater material resources and wealth in order to extend and further entrench its already considerable control, performatively constructing a greedy and politically apathetic population. Chua suggests that the state has effectively bartered increased material comfort for greater political control (Communitarian 19). Lo takes the argument a step further, stating that: "Anxiety and/or dissatisfaction with the heavy-handedness of the government has been ameliorated by discernible material rewards as Singapore's economy developed rapidly" (Staging Nation 138 – 139). The suggestion here is that material comfort placates the people, removing the desire to challenge state hegemony or even to express "dissatisfaction." In this highly materialistic society, political power and individual agency are ceded to the state, in exchange for the provision of a high standard of living. The state has constructed its citizens as fundamentally materialistic, by constantly reiterating the centrality of economic success to Singapore's future.

In Descendants, Kuo Pao Kun examines the materialism of Singapore society with a level of complexity that avoids simplistic binary oppositions of the material against the spiritual, or of the oppressive government against the oppressed individual. The work is a subtle allegory which looks at state intervention in the creation of a materialistic society, but also implicates the individual who capitulates to materialism, thus losing both spiritual ease and political agency. Like the official histories which emphasise the dominant contributions of Raffles and Lee, this play focuses on one man, Zheng He, "a historically significant figure whose stature in the region's history is roughly equivalent to that of Sir Stamford Raffles" (Peterson, Theater 96). However, Kuo subverts the approach of 'official' histories by allegorising Zheng He as a figure without agency or power. Historically, Zheng He has been represented as being instrumental in cementing trade ties between Ming China and Southeast Asia. Again,
the emphasis is on economic development. Kuo, however, uses Zheng He not to allegorise Singapore’s prosperity, but its spiritual poverty.

*Descendants* does not take a linear, chronological form, and has no plot in the conventional understanding of the term. The play is divided into scenes of varying length. The lines are not divided among specific characters; it is thus up to the directors to assign lines to actors, and indeed even to decide how many actors there should be, and of what gender, as Kuo’s text makes no specifications. The play appears simple: a few speakers are recounting the exploits of famed Ming dynasty Admiral Zheng He. They sometimes merely narrate the stories, while at other times they take on the role of Zheng He. The retellings are interspersed with anecdotes from the lives of the speakers. All we know about the speakers is that they are ‘Shentonites,’ employed in offices in Shenton Way, Singapore’s financial district. Ong refers to them as “archetypes of the successful Singapore” (Ong, “Interview”). Through their narrations they – and we – become aware of a deep connection between them and Zheng He. Kuo explores the implications of this connection in the rest of the play.

In the 1996 TheatreWorks production, the stage is virtually bare, containing nothing but four chairs upstage, and a few glass bowls downstage. At the back of the stage there is a large screen; throughout the performance, images of balance sheets, stock market figures, and so on are projected onto this screen. Four Shentonites, dressed in black and white corporate clothes, stumble into this stark, bare space, which is inhabited by a mysterious figure dressed in a white robe; this robe vaguely suggests a traditional Chinese costume, but is not a detailed replica of ancient Chinese court robes. The four Shentonites take turns to speak, recounting personal anecdotes or retelling episodes from Zheng He’s life. As they speak the mysterious robed figure (who might be Zheng He, although this is never stated) ceremoniously divests them of their shoes, trousers and skirts. He also washes their feet. Throughout the performance, the Shentonites shed and put on various items of clothing, creating a symbolic pattern which will be discussed at a later stage in this chapter. As the play progresses, they

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7 It should be noted that this information is not given in the script. We are merely given hints that they are corporate workers. It is director Ong Keng Sen who first contextualised them so specifically.

8 For this analysis, I am relying on the published script, as well as the video recording of the 1996 performance at the Victoria Theatre.

9 None of these actions are specified in the text, which is completely without stage directions. They are
grow to an awareness that although they have achieved success in their careers as well as material wealth, they lack something.

It is this lack which forms the message of the play. The idea of lack is concretised in the historical figure of Zheng He, the famed eunuch admiral of the Ming dynasty, who voyaged throughout Southeast Asia, as far as India and Africa. Born Ma He to a minority Muslim family in the Yunnan province, he was forcibly taken from his family and castrated while still a boy. Through hard work he was able to rise in the ranks, coming to the attention of the Emperor Chu Di, who changed Ma He’s name to Zheng He. As a eunuch, Zheng He has literally given up his manhood (or had it taken from him); symbolically, he has ceded his personal power or agency to the higher authoritative power of the Emperor. Ironically, this has led to a highly regarded position in Chu Di’s court, which suggests that castration can lead to the amassing of power. As Susan Tsang points out, “for those caught in hopeless poverty, the removal of their potency was the only way to gain power, wealth and position in court” (“Same Formula”). However, as a subject, Zheng He would have been completely at the mercy of the Emperor; such power as he had amassed was, therefore, illusory.

In this play, Zheng He can be seen as allegorising the position of Singaporeans today. Kuo himself has called the play an allegory (“Eunuch”), while Peterson refers to it as a “national allegory” (Theater 96). Kuo had moved from his earlier “realist approach to what he called The Theatre of Allegory” (Kwok, “Remembering” 196). I will read this play as being allegorical on more than one level. Allegories function most obviously at the basic level of the story. Here, the story is about a man who has his manhood taken from him, despite which he becomes a great and respected explorer. Beyond this, there is usually a ‘hidden’ level of meaning. In Descendants, however, there are at least two further levels of meaning; the allegory can be read as both private and political. According to Peterson, the play uses Zheng He’s “sacrifice as a metaphor for the losses of his compatriots. As with Zhenghe, who lost the full use of his ultimate signifier, each of the yuppies depicted in the play gave up some sacred or personal part of themselves in order to ascend the corporate ladder” (Theater 96 – 97). The play indirectly touches on what Singaporeans have given up in order to enjoy the prosperity
and high standard of living which are the hallmarks of Singaporean society today. Are these losses purely personal, or do they refer to the larger political matter of relinquishing personal agency to the dominating state, in exchange for wealth, position and comfort? Kuo does not condemn Singaporeans for having made this decision. He himself, having come out of the harsh environment of detention, had to confront the “peculiar softness” that governs Singaporean life (Kwok, “Remembering” 198). As Kuo notes, this soft way of life “somehow massages you in a way so comfortable that you tend to forget that before [...] you had some ideas” (Necessary Stage, “Playwright’s Voice” 71). Kwok has also noted this point, comparing it to a description of a method of castration, to be discussed later in this chapter (“Remembering” 198).

I will look at this play first as a political allegory. Kuo was deeply interested in political theatre from the beginning of his career. He spoke of working within a “highly politicised” theatre environment in Singapore in the early 1970s (Kuo, “Theatre” 395). In 1976, he was detained under Singapore’s Internal Security Act (ISA) for allegedly espousing Communist views. He was released four years later, and in 1989 “was awarded the Cultural Medallion for outstanding contribution and achievement in Singaporean theatre” (Kuo, “Theatre” 392); however, his citizenship (which was automatically revoked upon detention) was only restored in 1992, on Kuo’s second application – a fact which underscores the underlying insecurity of his position. It is this background of involvement in political theatre, and incarceration precisely for that involvement, which has led to the allegorical indirection of Descendants. Lo asserts that the detention experience had a profound impact on Kuo’s writing, stating for example that Kuo “was careful to frame his disclosures of the [internment] experience by artistic and philosophical issues rather than draw attention to its political repercussions” (Staging Nation 143 – 144). Peterson makes a similar point, noting that due to his period in detention, it is unlikely that Kuo “would ever be willing to actually put a name to the source of the oppression in the play’s final allegory” (Theater 98 – 99). Kuo’s habit, post-internment, was to work more through indirection than through direct, political commentary.

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10 The public accusation against Kuo asserted that: “His conversion to communist ideology was by self-indoctrination from the books he read in Australia [...]. He returned to Singapore in 1965 and set up a Performing Arts Studio to propagate leftist dance and drama” (“The Faces of Subversion,” Straits Times, 28 May 1976, cited in Wee and Lee 32).
Despite this, *Descendants* remains "probably the most trenchant political and social allegory ever written about contemporary Singapore" (Peterson, *Theater* 174). Wee and Lee echo the point, though more subtly, stating that the play "draws explicit parallels between the history of Zheng He and contemporary man, and the cost to be paid for service to the state – in this case, an anachronistic and allegorised Chinese nation-state" (26). Although it is not overtly stated here, if there are parallels between Zheng He and contemporary (Singaporean) man, then there must also be parallels between the "anachronistic [...] Chinese nation-state" and contemporary Singapore.

These parallels are apparent in scene five, in which the story of Zheng He's castration is narrated. Kuo presents two different versions of the story, one which highlights personal choice and one which positions the castrated individual as subjugated and victimised. And yet, even in the version which positions the eunuch as choosing subject, there is an underlying awareness that this choice involves a deliberate cession of personal agency. Kuo presents a complex and layered examination of Singaporeans here: on the one hand, it is possible to argue that the state removes individual agency; on the other, it is clear that there is a certain level of voluntary relinquishing of that agency, in favour of the 'soft' life provided by Singapore’s undeniably high standard of living.

In the first version, Zheng He states that the castration was voluntary: "It was my own decision to want to become a eunuch, because our family was very poor" (*Descendants* 44). Furthermore, he declares that it was carried out by his tearful and loving father, who would not perform the procedure without being convinced that his son was entirely willing for it to be done. When Zheng He is given his severed penis, he regards it as "a licence to enter the imperial palace, to hold privileged positions in the imperial household" (*Descendants* 45); in other words, relinquishing his physical potency is a step towards amassing personal power and the agency he would lack as the undistinguished younger son of a poor family.

Reading this version as allegory, the father represents the state; it can be asserted that Lee Kuan Yew sees himself very much as the father of the Singaporean state. It is significant that his autobiography is titled *The Singapore Story*, suggesting that Lee’s story and Singapore’s story are synonymous, that Singapore as it exists today
arose primarily out of Lee’s labour. Dennis Haskell notes that Singapore is “a nation utterly identified with one person – Lee Kuan Yew” (236), and that “[n]o-one else could title their memoirs ‘The Singapore Story’” (237). If the state and the father are one, then Zheng He’s submission to castration in order to join the ranks of imperial eunuchs (as a means of earning money for his father/family) can be read as the individual making a great sacrifice in the service of the state. The state here is figured as benevolent rather than dictatorial, unwilling to exact the ultimate sacrifice unless the individual is completely aware and willing. However, the ultimate point is that economic survival here requires the ceding of agency to the father/state.

Kuo undermines the vision of the benevolent state by abruptly confronting the audience or reader with the second version of what happened to Zheng He, claiming that he “didn’t choose like this.” Rather, he was “summarily cut and cleansed by his masters [...] because there was a need, a huge need for eunuchs” (Descendants 45). It is interesting that the ‘positive’ version is narrated in the first person, underlining Zheng He’s positioning of himself as speaking/choosing subject. The version which shows him as object rather than subject is narrated by someone else; Zheng He is thus shown not to have a voice. In this version, the state as loving father is replaced by “masters;” the choosing subject of Zheng He’s narration becomes an object, violently worked upon by the state for purely economic/administrative reasons (that is, to meet the “huge need” for eunuchs). This reading highlights the individual’s utter lack of agency in the face of the demands or needs of the state. The individual is passive, “cut and cleansed by his masters” rather than choosing to cede his power.

Kuo’s juxtaposition of these alternative versions of Zheng He’s castration is interesting, reminding us of White’s view of historical narrative as being essentially fictionalised (“Historical” 1712). It also recalls Gilbert’s idea of constructing the self in history (5). The first version of the story suggests the construction of a choosing and empowered subject, with Zheng He rewriting his story/history to imply a high level of individual agency. And yet, his acquiescence to castration, the removal of his “ultimate signifier” (Peterson, Theater 96), points to a fundamental lack of choice and agency. Whether voluntary or not, castration signifies the removal of power. By literally handing his penis to the Imperial Palace, the eunuch submits fully to authority. The
second, more brutal version highlights complete involuntary submission to the state resulting in the absence of choice and agency. In the first version, the presentation of the individual’s submission to castration as being voluntary suggests a refusal to acknowledge lack of agency. Extrapolating, we can link Zheng He’s refusal to engage with the reality of the brutally interventionist state, with the willingness of Singaporeans to cede political agency in favour of physical and material comfort. Kuo’s portrayal of Zheng He as fundamentally powerless forces questions about the value of ‘power’ as represented by money and position.

Kuo deflates the idea that the Imperial eunuchs had substantial power or agency. In scene six, when Zheng He is given his orders to embark on the first of his voyages, the dialogue reveals that despite the considerable latitude he has been given in terms of outfitting his armada and setting forth on his explorations, he is very much subordinate to the Emperor, who dismisses the eunuchs with threats of execution if his desires are not fulfilled. The state as benevolent father has been replaced by the figure of state as dominant and imperious ruler. The Emperor’s absolute authority is revealed in scene seven, in which Zheng He is renamed. His original name is Ma He; however in Chinese, ‘Ma’ means horse, “and so when he went to pay respects to the Emperor, you could, arguably, say that a horse had gone to court” which for the superstitious meant that there would be war (Descendants 55). The Emperor therefore decrees that Ma He shall henceforth be called Zheng He, thus removing the suggestion of threat. Symbolically, he is castrated again, his powerful, possibly antagonistic, name being removed and replaced with something innocuous.

As the Shentonites are drawn further into the examination of Zheng He’s life, they become more aware of the illusory nature of the power traditionally ascribed to Imperial eunuchs. In scene three, they recount a story about a room in the Imperial Palace, where all the boxes containing the penises of the eunuchs are stored. Legend states that these boxes were suspended from the ceiling, and that as a eunuch’s status rose, the box would correspondingly rise closer to the ceiling. The Shentonites realise that these suspended boxes look remarkably like a corporate organisational chart, with the most senior or most powerful individuals at the top. However, this realisation does not cement their belief in power. Rather, they become aware that they “look like a
network of pricks” (Descendants 41); this line, while comically deflating, also draws a
direct link between the Shentonites and the dried-up, impotent penises of the eunuchs.

Close association with the state means, in the case of Zheng He, the
relinquishing of individual power to that state. In return, the individual is given a
comfortable and seemingly autonomous life; in much the same way, the Singaporean
state has amassed considerable power over the lives of Singaporeans by providing a
high standard of living. This situation is allegorised in scene fifteen, a graphic account
of “the most sophisticated method” of castration (Descendants 64). This method begins
with gentle massage, which is experienced as pleasurable. Slowly the pressure is built
up, eventually destroying the testicles; however the individual is by this time so
habituated to the destructive pressure that it is still experienced as “comforting,
enjoyable and even highly desirable” (Descendants 65). The authority figure here
removes the individual’s power, without that individual being aware that such an
infringement of personal agency has been perpetrated. We are reminded here of Lo’s
assertion that “dissatisfaction with the heavy-handedness of the government has been
ameliorated by discernible material rewards” (Staging Nation 138 – 139). Submission
to the agency-negating methods of the state is viewed as pleasurable, because they
create (material) comfort.

Kuo suggests that it is only in isolation – that is, in separation from the state –
that individual agency can be assumed. He states in scene two that: “For three decades
Zheng He’s armada ruled the ocean,” but we are not allowed to forget that his power
came only by “divine command from the Ming Emperor” (Descendants 39). Later, a
Shentonite muses about Zheng He’s “loneliest moments, which probably were also his
freest moments” (Descendants 52). This takes us back to the first scene, in which a
Shentonite declares that “this loneliness is a potent one; it is an inviting loneliness.
There is a vast space all around me. Endless. Haunting. Unknown. But promising.”
(Descendants 38). While the Shentonite expresses “fear of this unknown,” he/she also
yearns for it. Loneliness suggests isolation, but the Shentonite dreams of a potent
loneliness, suggesting the power of choice and agency. Thus loneliness and vast space
can be read as individuality and freedom. It is only through separation from the
seemingly benevolent but ultimately castrating force of the state that any sense of
individual power can be achieved. In a nation like Singapore, where the authorities feel they have the right to legislate on intensely personal matters such as marriage and childbirth, such separation seems impossible. Just as Zheng He lives under the Ming Emperor's decree, so individuals in Singapore are intimately governed by the dominant state.

There is, then, a strong case for foregrounding a political reading of the play, but as Peterson points out, Descendants "is just open enough textually and visually to be perceived as a dream, as a statement about power and loss of self-worth, as a historical document, as social or even (indirect) political criticism, or as all of these" (Theater 99). An examination of the 1996 performance in Singapore suggests that director Ong adds another level of indirection to Kuo's veiled allegory, taking advantage of the 'openness' Peterson has noted in the text to avoid overt political commentary.

Ong agrees that the play can be seen as political "but on a larger level, it's not just about Singapore and politics but about castration in modern life - because we no longer allow ourselves to relate to our environment" (Susan Tsang, "Castration"). This is a vague, general comment which avoids the political by apparently referencing 'larger' issues. He is more specific when he pins this idea of castration down to being "so concerned about success" that "the little things that make up our life" are ignored (B. P. Koh, "Play About"); here, he acknowledges the overwhelmingly materialistic nature of the national identity. Critic Koh Boon Pin sees the play as drawing parallels "between the power struggles of court eunuchs and modern-day office workers, using the metaphor of castration to show how much they have sacrificed in order to climb up the corporate ladder" ("Castration and Corporate Ladder"), thus narrowing the play's field of reference to a very particular, non-political environment. Wee and Lee feel that the process of reconstructing the mythical past in relation to present identity "may also help us to avoid the objectifying/commodifying logic of 'pragmatic' capitalism that pervades contemporary life and art" (26). While all these commentators reference the state's adherence to materialism and 'pragmatism,' they skilfully avoid overtly implicating the state in the extent to which Singaporean life is pervaded by capitalism.
Capitalism, allegorised in the play as “markets” (Wee and Lee 26), is certainly a central point in this play. Zheng He’s voyages, justified by the Emperor’s desire to extend the “power, prestige and splendour of the Imperial Court [...] to the farthest shores” (Descendants 46), were also motivated by the desire to accrue the wealth and tributes that would come with the setting up of dominions. Geoff Wade explains that the Ming voyages were intended to “achieve a pax Ming throughout the known world and collect treasures for the Court” (11). However, there is a difference between capitalism as imagined in the Ming Dynasty, and that experienced in modern-day Singapore. Scene thirteen portrays a trading mission between Imperial China and one of the countries visited by Zheng He. Although this is a commercial transaction, Kuo highlights the spectacle, the grandeur, the sheer dazzling wealth of the two parties involved, the nobility of the people, and the excitement it brings Zheng He. In the 1996 TheatreWorks production, Ong had his actors continuously whirling around as the speech was delivered, creating an impression of wild, unrestrained joy. Significantly that joy only manifests itself when a commercial transaction is taking place. While the commercial is also central to contemporary Singapore, however, it does not bring happiness in its wake. Wee and Lee suggest that Zheng He experiences “a sort of prelapsarian capitalism,” something which exceeds “the confines of alienated life in the modern nation, with the potential for cultural exchange still alive” (27). The postlapsarian capitalism of modern-day Singapore ignores the potential for cultural exchange, for spiritual rather than material dialogue, and emphasises only the financial. Spiritual considerations are ignored, with the result that the Shentonites experience only “some yearning unhappiness within them” (Tsang, “Castration”), knowing nothing of the joy that comes to Zheng He.

While Ong highlights this factor he downplays the political will behind the existence of this “yearning unhappiness.” This is made clear in the physical elements of his staging of the play. The clean, spare set design by Kuo Jian Hong creates what the program for the 1996 Singapore production refers to as “a dreamworld” (“Synopsis,” Descendants Program). Susan Tsang refers to this dreamworld as a “sacred space” (“Castration”). The Shentonites come to the sacred space to recover or discover some personal meaning and agency. The starkness of the set design creates an atmosphere of asceticism, providing a contrast to the materialism and greed of the outside world. Ong
states that in his work he is “often focusing on the intangible, precisely because we are so concerned with the material and tangible” (B. P. Koh, “Out to Create”); certainly the creation of an abstract dreamworld does serve to remove the Shentonites from the ‘real’ world which seeks to castrate them. However, by creating this extreme abstraction, Ong also distances the events of the play from Singapore, thus again distancing the production from overt political comment.

This issue of avoidance of the political – visible not only in Ong’s directorial approach but also in the circumspection of commentators such as Wee and Lee – can be tied back to Kuo’s earlier-mentioned point about the ‘softness’ of life in Singapore. Ong, Wee and Lee show themselves to be imbricated in the state’s project to centralise power within itself. Although aware of being dominated by the state, there is also a level of willingness to be dominated; individuals are thus complicit in creating the conditions of their own subjugation. It is not, however, possible to state with any certainty that these individuals are conscious of their imbrication, which manifests itself in a general reluctance to acknowledge or engage with the political. Hence, Ong sets Kuo’s play in a neutral, non-engaged ‘dreamworld.’

Despite this, the staging does contain some moments and suggestions of political engagement; they are subtle and require the audience to read far below the surface. An interesting element is the staging of the scenes involving the Emperor. As mentioned earlier, Kuo does not specify how many actors there should be, or exactly which parts they should play. Descendants could conceivably be played as a monologue. Alternatively, there could be room for greater specificity in embodying particular characters. For example, in scenes involving the Emperor, he could be played by one particular actor garbed in Imperial robes, visibly embodying the state – a similar effect was achieved, for example, in Elangovan’s staging of Changi, in the scene in which Chye talks to his Minister. Ong, however, has chosen to divide the Emperor’s lines among the four yuppies. This suggests that the Emperor (that is, the castrating force of the state) has been incorporated into each individual; the state’s disciplinary power has been literally internalised.

Another example occurs when the yuppies shed their corporate uniforms. As the play progresses, the robed figure removes the shoes of the yuppies and bathes their feet
in a ritual cleansing which suggests that they are leaving behind the world symbolised by their clothes. The process of shedding clothes continues until they have stripped down to shirts and underwear. At one point they take off their shirts to reveal harness-like contraptions (somewhat reminiscent of bondage gear) around their chests: are they, despite shedding their uniforms, still in harness, still controlled by the state? Finally they don silky robes similar to those worn by the robed man. Does this visual link indicate a spiritual link as well? Are they free now, having been divested of their restrictive corporate uniforms? Or, if the unidentified man is Zheng He, have they become eunuchs like him? While the use of costume to question the position of the yuppies is very subtle, it does suggest some politicisation: the yuppies have apparently ‘escaped’ authority by entering this dreamworld, but even so there are suggestions that they remain in thrall, bounded and castrated.

At the same time, however, the text and staging do suggest the slow development of another facet of identity, namely the racially-transcendent Singaporean self. As mentioned earlier, the text does not specify how many characters there are, nor does it make any suggestions as to the racial and gender make-up of the cast. Performances of this play in Singapore and Malaysia have seen casts of both men and women from across the racial spectrum. The treatment of race in this play is interesting, if compared to Yeo’s approach in Singapore Trilogy. Yeo commented tellingly (if unconsciously) on the race question by including only one non-Chinese Singaporean character, thus underlining the sinicised identity of Singapore. In Descendants, race is open, hinting at the potential development of an overarching ‘Singaporean’ identity.

In the next section it will be shown that similar developments (in a Malaysian context) are visible in Kee Thuan Chye’s play, which deals with similar themes – greed and the role of the state in creating a greedy citizenry. His approach is also allegorical, but without the level of indirection and avoidance visible in Kuo’s script and Ong’s staging.
Malaysia Past and Present: Treading Old Paths in *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch*

*Birch* is based on the events surrounding the assassination, in November 1875, of J. W. W. Birch, the British Resident appointed to Perak. Kee Thuan Chye uses the incident as a starting point from which to examine the identities of modern-day Malaysians, whom he sees as self-centred, materialistic and greedy. The love of money, he suggests through his characters, is the defining characteristic of the modern Malaysian. In the case of Singapore, as discussed in the section on *Descendants*, the development of this materialistic identity came about as a result of state policy to highlight economic pragmatism as a tool of survival. Given that at the time of independence Malaysia already had a thriving economy based on tin and rubber, the institution of similar policies was unnecessary. Despite this, however, Malaysian society has increasingly come to focus on wealth acquisition and material comfort. Kee refers to it as “the corruption, the crass materialism that we’ve acquired” (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 1) He also examines the concept of power, paying close attention to how power is used by those who have it.

The play is, in effect, an indictment of a state which (in 1994) was riding high on a wave of extraordinary economic success and, in the wake of that success, emphasised money and power through its own actions. In 1993, MARA\(^\text{11}\) and its chairman Tamrin Ghafar (son of then-Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba) came under investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Agency “for the 1992 purchase of M$28 million (US$11 million) of memberships in a fashionable golf club near Kuala Lumpur” and the “purchase of a condominium unit” well above market value for the chairman (Tsuruoka, “On the Golf Links” 55). Later in that year Samy Velu, then Minister for Energy, Telecommunications and Posts, was cleared “of wrongdoing in the allocation of shares in Telekom Malaysia, the privatised national telecoms provider,” although opposition politician Lim Kit Siang alleged that the Anti-Corruption Agency investigation ultimately shielded the practice of corruption in high office (Tsuruoka, “Probe” 63). There were suggestions that former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad sought to consolidate and strengthen his power base “by chipping away at institutions that notionally check his executive power,” namely the monarchy,

\(^{11}\) MARA is the acronym for *Majlis Amanah Rakyat*, “a Malaysian Government trust dedicated to helping
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the judiciary and the press (Vatikiotis and Tsuruoka 20). Kee refers in this play to various corrupt and questionable practices by the nation’s leaders. However, he also examines the culpability of the people who, living comfortable lives brought about by the country’s burgeoning economy, choose not to rock the boat. As one article points out: “Mahathir may have expanded his executive powers at the expense of institutional checks and balances, but he also commands support from the country’s sizeable middle class […]. So long as the burgeoning Malaysian middle class prospers, the consolidation of Mahathir’s power goes unchallenged” (Vatikiotis and Tsuruoka 22). This is reminiscent of the cession of political agency in Singapore, as discussed in the section on Descendants.

Like Kuo, Kee is a political playwright, though political awareness came to him slightly later than it did to Kuo. He states that in 1979, some time after graduating from university in Penang (where he had grown up), he came to Kuala Lumpur. Penang being a Chinese-dominated state, he grew up largely unaware of the racial imbalances which were evident in other parts of the country, so that when he moved to Kuala Lumpur he “found the place very different. The imbalances tended to be more sharply focused, and that launched me on my political phase, which began with 1984 and which I don’t think has ended” (Abishegam, “Birch”). His play 1984 – Here and Now, loosely based on George Orwell’s 1984, was a highly political piece which Kee describes as “agitprop” (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 5). While studying for a Masters degree at the University of Essex he wrote The Big Purge, a play which touches on hegemonic politics and racial policies. 12 While the political targets and implications in these plays are veiled – no contemporary political figures are named; neither is Malaysia – neither of them is as indirect in its implications as Descendants. Kee’s plays are sometimes so pointed in their meaning that they can just barely be called ‘allegory.’ However, as he himself notes, his expression of his political views has become more subtle: “1984 was a very propagandist play […]. It was obviously pushing a certain point. When I got to Mr. Birch, it was better if one didn’t push – to let the various

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12 The play was performed in Essex in 1988, shortly after it was written, and was showcased in 2005 by Typhoon 4, an annual playreading festival held in London. It has never been performed in Malaysia. It was published in Singapore in 2004, and is available in bookshops in Malaysia.
viewpoints emerge and leave the audience with their own conclusions. Mr. Birch was more successful because it was subtler” (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 5).

Kee, unlike Kuo, has never been detained under the ISA. He would, therefore, still feel a relative freedom to express his political views more openly. Kee has in fact suffered remarkably little censorship despite the political and partisan nature of his plays. The only backlash he suffered from the staging of 1984, for example, was the refusal on the part of the authorities to grant a licence for his next theatrical venture. Birch, however, was staged with the active support of KBN, a government body; suggestions for cuts were made, but Kee refused and no further action was taken (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 3). This apparently more open response could be linked to the fact that Kee writes in English; as Lo notes, “the regulation of English language theatre is relatively relaxed, due to the perception that it addresses an elite, urban and professional audience who have a vested interest in the status quo” (Staging Nation 83). This suggestion implicates the audience in diffusing the effect of Kee’s politically loaded plays; as noted earlier, Fletcher has dismissed the notion that “all people must see the double meaning” in an allegory (7). In the staging of Birch in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the reactions of the audience suggested that the political message of the play was not taken on board, or was perhaps refused, for fear of personal reprisal. However, as Angus Fletcher points out, the hidden meaning in an allegory is bound to be seen and understood by someone (7 – 8), and can therefore be said to have an impact, even if it does not result in immediate revolutionary action.

Birch is in some ways the most direct of Kee’s political plays; 1984 and The Big Purge are set in ‘parallel’ worlds which are recognisably Malaysian, but are not named as such. Authority figures are similarly disguised. The political issues, however (racial injustice, hegemonic control by the state), are glaringly clear, the points hammered mercilessly home by the writer. Birch, in contrast, is set in colonial Malaya and modern Malaysia, the historical figures are accurately named, and the plot borrows from recorded history. It is therefore impossible to avoid the fact that any social or political implications which come out of this play refer directly to Malaysia. However, it is also the least propagandist and didactic of Kee’s plays, and the allegorical meaning is therefore more subtle and harder to glean.
In contrast to the graceful lyricism of *Descendants*, *Birch* is an irreverent, iconoclastic romp through history, blending past and present, history and fiction, in a sometimes bewildering manner. The basic premise of the plot is that a group of actors is rehearsing a play about the assassination of Birch. The play therefore appears to shift between past and present. The ‘past’ is represented by those scenes in which the actors are rehearsing the play; the ‘present’ refers to scenes in which they revert to their contemporary selves (it is important to note that ‘actor’ here cannot be conflated with ‘performer,’ as the actors are characters created and scripted by the playwright). Since the nineteenth-century events are presented as being part of a twentieth-century rehearsal, the audience remains aware that *Birch* is in fact set entirely in the present.

Kee complicates the idea of past and present by introducing a group of yuppies from Kuala Lumpur who drift in and out of the action, deciding where to have dinner, discussing the share market, passing on stock market tips and so on. They are completely unrelated to the action surrounding the rehearsal of the play. However, in one or two surreal moments, past and present do meet through the yuppies. In one example, the actors are rehearsing a scene in which a slave runs from his master. The slave and his captors abruptly meet up with the yuppies. At this one moment, the actors are no longer just actors—they become the nineteenth-century characters whom they are meant to be playing, while the yuppies remain their twentieth-century selves (*Birch* 49 – 52). Past and present thus appear intertwined, so that one is implicated in the production of the other.

The events of 1875 in Perak provide the background to Kee’s play. There was disagreement over the succession to the throne of Perak, as well as violent fights between the members of two rival Chinese tin-mining groups. These unsettled conditions led to British intervention in the form of recognition of Raja Abdullah as the Sultan of Perak and the appointment of Birch as Resident to the state; his job was to “advise the new sultan on matters pertaining to the government of the state and all matters other than Malay custom and religion” (*Birch* 29). Birch aroused the wrath of the Malay nobles and chiefs by, among other things, interfering in the customary practice of debt bondage (he gave refuge to runaway slaves in his house). In September of 1875, Birch forced Sultan Abdullah to sign a proclamation which handed the
administration of Perak to the British, in return for pensions for Abdullah and prospective heirs to the throne, and the return of all runaway slaves. The proclamation was posted, arousing anger against Birch, and he was assassinated in Pasir Salak (Wilkinson 135 – 138).

Differing interpretations can be put on this incident. Andaya and Andaya, for example, suggest that: "Popular interpretations of [Birch's] death have seen it as an outburst against British authority, the first stirrings of an incipient nationalism" (166). Wilkinson, although generally preserving an air of impartiality, betrays his partisanship when he states that: "The Resident had been murdered" (138), turning what could be seen as an act of political challenge (assassination) into a base, brutal killing. Historiography, as was discussed earlier, is a performative construct, open to manipulation and interpretation. Kee's choice of historical event and characters is significant, as is the use he makes of them. Previous interpretations of the event focus on the essential nobility involved – either the nobility of the Malays who chose to strike a blow against British dominance, or the nobility of the defenceless Colonial officer cut down by angry and resentful natives. Kee, however, chooses to highlight the more venal motivations behind the assassination, to paint modern Malaysia as a country in which greed and self-interest are paramount.

The first overt statement about greed comes from Birch, who declares that: "There is much to be made from this place. A lot of tin to be turned into gold in the booming market. Otherwise why would the British Crown be interested in intervening in the local affairs?" (Birch 32). Kee focuses on the exploitative nature of colonialism, turning Birch into a hard, cynical functionary of a voracious administration. However, he does not take this approach in order to create a coloniser/colonised dichotomy which paints the colonised subject as noble or altruistic. They too are shown to be grasping and self-centred. For example, Fernando points out that, in focusing on the issue of slavery in Perak, Kee complicates the portrayal of the local nobility, undermining interpretations of Birch's assassination as a glorious bid for freedom from colonial rule: "If the colonial officers of the time were tyrants, Kee says, so were the elite classes of

13 There is even a trace of this nobility in Lee Joo For’s treatment of Birch in Happening, evident in the scene when Birch, distraught at the death of his houseboy, goes out alone to face the murderous mob.
Malay society of those days. Birch and Maharaja Lela were equally, though differently, culpable” (“Audacious”).

This culpability is shown in their overwhelmingly materialistic motivations. Birch appeals to the Sultan and Chiefs to accept ‘improvements’ in the revenue system, but meets with resistance. Maharaja Lela laughs at the thought, asking: “Did he think Raja Abdullah and the chiefs would agree to give up their own interests?” (Birch 36). At a meeting with the Chiefs, Sultan Abdullah complains that Birch “wants to subvert our tradition by taking away our customary function of collecting revenue” (Birch 66), thus putting a more high-minded gloss on his anger. Raja Yusuf puts a different interpretation on Abdullah’s anger: “You mean he wants to take away our means to get filthy rich” (Birch 66). These portrayals of Birch, Sultan Abdullah and the Chiefs re-construct them as hypocritical and acquisitive; they exemplify Kee’s view that: “Self-interest takes high priority in a lot of people’s lives” (Al-Attas).

Kee further deconstructed the image of these historical characters as heroic or noble through the physical performances which he, as director, elicited from the cast. These performances generally went much further than the script in constructing the characters as ignoble and non-heroic. In fact, through the portrayals by the actors, the nineteenth-century characters often ended up looking buffoonish. In the script, for example, Kee outlines a scene in which Birch is chased and caught by two Silat exponents; they attack him and disappear, upon which Birch suddenly awakes and we realise that the scene was a nightmare (Birch 37). In the 1994 performance, the scene was played in slow motion, which heightened the comic effect rather than creating suspense. Given that the silat exponents were fully dressed in their ceremonial regalia, Birch’s appearance in nothing more than underwear made him look not only vulnerable but also faintly ridiculous. The audience certainly responded to the comedy of the scene.

In the scene in which Sultan Abdullah and the Chiefs discuss what to do about Birch, the dialogue seems fairly straightforward (Birch 65 – 70). In performance, however, actor Mano Maniam (who played Abdullah) played the scene for all its

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14 *Silat* is a Malay form of martial arts.
15 My analysis of the play is based on the published script as well as the June 1994 production in Kuala
comedic worth. When Maharaja Lela calls from offstage "[k]ill him!" the Sultan’s scripted response is merely "[w]ho said that?" – a line which could conceivably have been played with some authority and dignity. When Maniam spoke the line, however, he dropped his royal poise, hunched over suddenly, looked shiftily around the stage, and spoke in a weak, comical voice, instantly destroying any pretence of nobility and strength, and turning Abdullah into a foolish figure of fun.

Thus most of the authority figures in the play are turned into clownish figures, unworthy of the respect usually heaped upon them; Chan Yuen-Li explains that in Kee’s view “it is common for history and personages of history to be viewed with awe. They are seen as icons of virtue […]. Kee seeks to subvert and deconstruct this greatness.” I would argue, however, that Kee’s main intention here is not to subvert the greatness of the historical figures per se, but to use them as allegorical representations of contemporary authority, and thus to indirectly subvert that authority. He asserts that the play is “about us today, some of the features of people today and indirectly comparing it to the past” (Al-Attas); in a later interview, he declares that the plays he has written “are driven by the present. I look around me and there’s so much to write about” (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 1). His concerns are clearly focused on the present.

This is emphasised by the introduction into the action of the yuppies, enthusiastic citizens of the modern materialistic state. The clash between nineteenth and twentieth centuries sets up a complex exploration of the greed and laziness of modern-day Malaysians. In the scene in which nineteenth and twentieth centuries meet, the slave, Siputum, is accused of stealing from his master, Datuk Sagor. The Datuk is constructed as a benign father figure: he “takes good care of [the slave], gives him food and shelter; also for his wife. They do a bit of work in return” (Birch 50). It is not hard to read the Datuk as analogous with the benevolent state which nurtures and cares for its citizens in return for “a bit of work.” Extrapolating further, the “care” which the Datuk provides can also be read as an allegory of the affirmative action policies instituted for the Bumiputras under the New Economic Policy (NEP).

If Datuk Sagor represents the state, then its citizens are the “ungrateful” slave who has stolen from his master by taking these privileges without in turn fulfilling his

Lumpur.
obligations. The yuppie Ashburn\textsuperscript{16} berates him for taking advantage of Datuk Sagor's generosity, telling him that "if you have to pay back what you owe, you have to do it. No more asking for concessions. No more subsidy mentality" (Birch 51). These particular phrases refer to Bumiputra privilege as outlined in the NEP, and the state's dissatisfaction with the response of the majority of the population who took what was on offer without using it to better themselves and the state. Dr. Mahathir has, for example, demanded that Malay business men should "reduce their reliance on government intervention in the economy and [...] concentrate on developing their entrepreneurial and management skills" (Tsuruoka, "Prop" 25), and has also called "for the Malays to wean themselves away from the privileges and protection" provided by the NEP (Vatikiotis 26). However, there is no one in the play who can avoid being tarred by the brush of Ashburn's accusation, least of all Ashburn himself. He is motivated entirely by the desire to make money quickly through the stock market, relying on hot tips from well-connected insiders (Birch 49). Sofea accuses him of greed, but he responds that he is just "taking part in enterprise, making the right moves, taking calculated risks, competing in the marketplace. That's what our Ministers and Menteris Besar are encouraging us to do" (Birch 49).\textsuperscript{17}

Ashburn's reference brings us to the important point of the influence of the authorities - the Ministers and Menteris Besar - in creating this greedy, self-interested population. Kee uses historical figures such as Birch, Abdullah, Datuk Sagor and so on in order to highlight this complicity allegorically, that is, without specifically naming contemporary names. However, it is clear that they are all authority figures; and by linking nineteenth-century authority figures with the twentieth century, Kee obliquely implicates the state in the construction of the materialistic modern population.

In this context, the metaphor of slavery has interesting nuances. While in the scene with the yuppies Datuk Sagor is represented as being a kind and caring figure, a previous scene shows him to be abusive and cruel, beating Kuntum (Siputum's wife) and ordering Siputum to tear the nails off his thumbs as punishment for what he claims is Kuntum's poor work (Birch 45). He is shown to be almost completely dominant in the lives of his slaves, who are seen as his "property" (Birch 46). If Sagor continues to

\textsuperscript{16} 'Ashburn' is a literal translation of his actual name, Abu Bakar.
allegorically represent the state, its benevolence and generosity towards its citizens is seriously undermined by this picture of him as a callous slave-owner. It also challenges the view of individuals being ‘taken care of’ in a benevolent manner, instead reducing them to slaves to their materialistic masters, in danger from the economic motivations which pervade society – Siputum, for example, became a slave because his business failed and he could not repay his loans.

And yet, as Kee points out, greed as a motivating factor in society remains paramount. When one of Ashburn’s friends expresses sympathy for Siputum, Ashburn’s unintentionally ironic reply is that “you cannot take pity on such people anymore. Times have changed. We have changed” (Birch 52). Yet clearly, little has really changed. Ashburn is, like Abdullah, consumed by his desire for wealth; and like Siputum, he ends up a kind of debt slave to the stock market. The clearest indication of how little has changed comes at the end of the play as the nineteenth and twentieth-century characters meld together to form an undifferentiated group. The actor playing the role of Kuntum reads from a book about the eventual end of the practice of debt bondage. As soon as she has finished, Ashburn rushes on, mobile phone in hand, panicking over falling share prices, himself a slave to debt. Kuntum, given a mobile phone of her own, joins in despite her personal experience with debt bondage (Birch 82 – 83). She is as easily taken in by the promise of wealth as the yuppies. In relation to Descendants, Ong Keng Sen asks the question: “Are we slaves to our aspirations?” (“Interview”) – a question which is also deeply relevant to Birch. Sadly, the only aspirations on display are driven by the desire for money and power.

Kee’s decision to set the greater part of the action of the play in the nineteenth century sets up important resonances. The chaos in Perak is cited as the reason for the beginning of colonial rule in Malaya (Andaya and Andaya 158); this particular period therefore marks the earliest interactions of the Malays and the British when both were contending to govern the country. Thus Birch and the Malay nobles can both represent the governing authority; extrapolated to modern times, they are representative of the state. While the nobles and colonials are representative of the modern state, Kee is careful not to directly implicate their current-day counterparts. By using the historical

17 Menteri Besar is the Malay term for Chief Minister.
narrative as the basis for his tale, Kee engenders some distance from the present. In those instances when he is more direct, actually referring to recent events which encapsulate his ideas about corruption and self-interest, he is careful to do so slyly, never naming names. It is therefore up to the attentive reader/audience member to search for the hidden meaning behind his tale.

As mentioned earlier, however, the audiences in Malaysia and Singapore were not necessarily interested in openly voicing their political opinions and reactions, as became clear in the performance of a particular scene in the play. In this scene, the actors gather and discuss various current events which reflect authoritative use and abuse of power: in the June 1994 production, the topics were the withdrawal of the publishing permits of three newspapers in 1987 and the sacking of the Lord President in 1988. One of the actors wonders: “Who ensures that the government does not abuse its power?” Another actor suggests that he ask the audience (Birch 40). The first actor goes to the audience, microphone in hand, and asks random audience members. He then extemporises, extending the debate, depending on the response from the audience.

The responses at the Kuala Lumpur performances were timid, on the whole; most audience members preferred to avoid answering at all. In Singapore, this scene elicited an interesting response from reviewer Koh Boon Pin, who declared that the “confrontational device missed its mark as most of those questioned stayed silent, despite the bully-tactic employed by the actor” (“Play Walks”). Koh’s rhetoric constructs the performer as a hectoring individual trying to force a response out of the defiantly silent Singapore audience. I would suggest, however, that like the audience in Kuala Lumpur, the Singaporeans made an active choice not to confront or challenge the hegemony of the state. This was self-censorship at its most literal, a refusal to voice a personal but disruptive opinion in a public forum. It can be argued that it was the very public nature of that forum which discouraged an open, politically-engaged response. The muted reaction may have been indicative of the political environment, rather than of an individual inability to respond politically.

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18 All scenes referring to current events were adapted and made topical for the performances in Singapore; Koh Boon Pin notes the reference to “the flogging of Michael Fay, the restricting of certain periodicals, the snipping of Josef Ng’s pubic hair and the aim to be a global centre for the arts” (“Play Walks”). Future
Mano Maniam (left) as Sultan Abdullah and Ahmad Yatim (right) as Datuk Sagor (*Birch*, June 1994). Image courtesy of Kee Thuan Chye.

Despite his perception of self-censorship as “a serious disease” (qtd. in Yeo, “Introduction” 11), Kee admits to practicing it himself, stating that “even though I say I try not to, I am aware that there are certain things that should not be dealt with” (Kee, “Kee Thuan Chye” 3). In one scene, a performer tells the audience that: “What happens next in this play was supposed to have been something else originally, but the playwright decided to take it out for fear that it might offend some people and result in severe repercussions” (*Birch* 42). This admission of self-censorship works in interesting ways. By admitting to practising it, Kee brings the matter into the space of public discussion. He also subtly indicts the regime which engenders the practice. He does not openly state that the authorities would clamp down on him if he did not censor himself; he does, however, say that “some people” might find his words offensive, and that this could “result in severe repercussions.” Logically, we realise that severe repercussions could only come at the hands of the state, rather than from the relatively powerless ‘people.’ Thus, while he practices self-censorship, he also uses the chance to highlight and comment on it, and on the repressive power that produces it.

performances, in Malaysia or Singapore, would have to be updated to refer to the most current events.
Intertwined with Kee’s views on the grasping nature of Malaysians are indictments of the desire for power which is concomitant with the desire for wealth. Anthony Milner has commented, with reference to colonial Malaya, that “for Malays, the possession of wealth was instinctively conceptualized in terms of what we today might term ‘power’” (44). In a speech which mixes veneration of tradition with the more mundane wish to hold on to his wealth, Maharaja Lela declares that Birch is “kurang ajar”19 because: “He wants to humiliate us before our people. We are chiefs, the money must come to us. We must be seen to have the power” (Birch 34 –35). Abdullah, however, gives up his power when he accedes to the British decision that the Resident will administer Perak. Abdullah shouts his defiance, proclaiming that: “One of these days we are going to have a policy to buy British last!” (Birch 72),20 but this rings hollow as he has willingly ceded his actual power in order to hold on to the appearance of power while receiving a pension from the British. Like Admiral Zheng He and his spiritual descendants the Shentonites, Abdullah has been castrated. He has had his ‘ultimate signifier,’ that is, his power as a ruler, removed.

In this instance, Abdullah represents the individual who has ceded his agency to the state, embodied in this scene by the governor, Sir William Jervois. In the Kuala Lumpur and Singapore productions, governor Sir Andrew Clarke and his successor Jervois were played by the same performer, with no attempt made to dress or characterise them differently, creating a sense of the ruling authority as a never-ending series of look-alike governors, an implacable juggernaut before which the individual is powerless. Abdullah cedes his power to the British juggernaut in order to maintain some semblance of power. Lacking the financial means to rule independently, he nonetheless retains his throne and his personal wealth, and thus appears to have maintained his royal power. Like eunuchs who have been castrated using the method that leaves them apparently ‘intact,’ there is no visible clue to Abdullah’s fundamental impotence.

19 A Malay phrase, literally meaning “insufficiently taught,” which indicates a lack of manners and civility. Correct manners are of deep importance in Malay society, and the phrase is thus considered a damning indictment. It was also of topical interest in 1994, as former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating had recently referred to Mahathir as “recalcitrant.” This had mistakenly been translated in the local media as “kurang ajar,” and there was a furious response to what appeared to be an insult to Mahathir.
20 Mahathir did in fact institute such a policy in the 1980s.
The modern state is also directly depicted as an implacable force, removing individual agency in order to amass authority and power. Kee has his characters discuss this power by reading out various incidents, taken from newspaper reports, which highlight this castrating force. The following extract is just one example:

ACTOR/L: (reads) A Cabinet minister once said, quote: ‘The media must be given freedom to express opinions freely, even the right to be wrong. But if it abuses its right, then the authorities have a duty to intervene.’ Unquote. In 1987 three newspapers had their publishing permits withdrawn. (Birch 39 – 40).

Here, Kee structures the actor’s remarks such that these abuses of power appear as civic obligations on the part of the authorities. They “intervene” only when responsibility is, according to their definitions, ignored or abnegated. State power is here constructed as necessary control, without which the nation will again face chaos and crisis. The underlying suggestion is that it is necessary to pass control and agency to the state, to ensure continued stability and prosperity.

Just as Abdullah has given up his power in return for a comfortable pension from the British, the yuppies seem to have ceded political and social responsibility and awareness in return for large profits on the stock market – helped along by insider tips from well-connected Datuks. Yet Kee does not portray them as morally reprehensible or villainous. In this play, there is no certainty as to who is a villain, and who a hero. It is interpretation that makes an individual either hero or villain; Kee has reinterpreted history to show all these characters as morally ambivalent and motivated entirely by considerations of wealth and power. Only Maharaja Lela is shown to be ‘heroic’ in any way. While Abdullah and the Chiefs fear for their wealth and status, Lela’s anger with Birch springs also from fear of the potential loss of tradition and cultural values. He is confident that Birch will be defeated by tradition because it is something by which the Malays “live and die” (Birch 35). His belief in the sanctity of tradition is embodied in the two Silat exponents who perform while Lela speaks about the strength and value of tradition (Birch 35). By linking tradition with an ancient martial art, Kee seems to

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21 *Datuk* is a title which can be conferred on prominent individuals by any of the ruling Kings of Malaysia.
suggest that there is a deep level of strength and power in maintaining ancient culture and customs.

However, Kee undermines Lela's apparent nobility. Lela's opinions turn him, at points, into a representative of the state. He has a strongly hierarchical turn of mind, favouring categories and divisions. Permeability of the borders between categories is not to be countenanced, as it will cause a breakdown of order. Lela feels that by harbouring runaway slaves, Birch is "encouraging the slaves to stand up against their masters" (Birch 56). He believes that power must remain with those who have traditionally held it, and that any violation of this will lead to chaos: "Without order," he claims, "we will be less than human" (Birch 61). Though Lela's expression of the need for order is more extreme than current authoritative practices of essentialisation and categorisation, it does reflect these practices and the state's opposition to the growth of disordered, organically hybrid identities. However, Kee's portrayal of the group of yuppies points to the slow development of hybrid, permeable identities.

As in Descendants there is some optimism in the portrayal of the group of yuppies. That the kind of harmonious racial grouping striven after by Malaysians of an earlier time should now be deemed so natural should surely be cause for celebration. Kee does not address the problem of race which was central to 1984 and The Big Purge. Lo points out that "racial politics is the overt ruling principle in Malaysia" ("Where Are" 5), and race is still manipulated and politicised by parties on both sides of the political fence. In this play, however, race is not a site of contestation. While Kee cannot change the race of the nineteenth-century characters, he has more scope with the yuppies. Although Ashburn and Chee Yoon are racially identifiable as a Malay and a Chinese respectively, the two women are not. Kuo, in Descendants, also chooses not to differentiate his characters by race or even by gender. Both writers are thus able to widen their scope of reference to include a large segment of society, without recourse to the traditional divisions of race and religion.

Conclusion

Kuo and Kee have used historical characters to allegorically represent the current state of their respective nations, their approach indicating the need (in the face
of strict but often arbitrary application of censorship laws) to disguise political commentary.

The approach of the two playwrights studied here to the question of national identity indicates a shift in thinking from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the earlier era the nation was seen as a public construction, a greater polity within which the individuals belonged; it was viewed idealistically, as an icon worth working towards. Twenty years later, these playwrights are more concerned with the effect of this public construction on the individual. The nation is now examined from the point of view of private or individual experience: the question being asked is, “what has the nation made of its citizens,” rather than “what have the citizens done for their nation.” Despite the level of cynicism implicit in this kind of questioning, however, the fact that both writers choose to create characters for whom racial identity is not specified, indicates that to some extent a national identity – a feeling for nation rather than race – has developed. However, that identity is tentative and fragile at best. Indeed, in chapters three and five, it becomes clear that the focus comes back to ideas of difference and separation.

It is the dependence of both writers on allegory which is of most interest, however. The perceived need for indirection in approaching political matters is a response to heavy-handed political intervention and unpredictable censorship laws in both countries. However the English-language theatre in Malaysia appears more able than its Singaporean counterpart to comment fairly overtly on current political topics. We might surmise that this is due to the perception of the authorities that the elite urbanites who comprise the audiences to these plays are concerned primarily with maintaining the status quo (Lo, Staging Nation 83). However, such a perception might be challenged by the view that some “younger and more sophisticated” Malaysians have begun to “question some of the government’s long-standing curbs on political freedom” (Tsuruoka, “Prop” 24). Subsequent responses to some politically-challenging work (such as Election Day and performances by ICTC) indicate that the censorship radar still functions strongly; the authorities might, therefore, be more aware of this undercurrent of political resistance.

Singapore’s reactions to politically-oriented plays are more draconian, and political playwrights in Singapore work by even greater indirection and generalisation
than do their Malaysian counterparts. Kuo's plays *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* and *No Parking on Odd Days* can be read as reactions against the extreme rigidity of Singaporean authorities and the eventual submission of rebels to their overwhelming force. However, there is never any overt reference to political parties. That politically vocal theatre practitioners work under intense scrutiny and in danger of punitive action is indicated by the 1987 arrests, under the ISA, of members of Singapore theatre group Third Stage (Peterson, *Theater* 40). Peterson does note that under Goh Chok Tong's leadership, many 'sensitive' political topics were dealt with by various theatre groups, but "often under the guise of settings in 'fictional' Asian countries" (*Theater* 41) – again, politics needs to be approached through allegory.

What is clear in both cases is that while there is some political will, there is little open political space. Attempts by writers such as Kee and Kuo to widen these spaces are not wholly successful, but these attempts do suggest the beginning of the failure of authoritative control of these spaces, as individual comment begins to become slightly more open and challenging. In the next chapter, however, the focus shifts even further away from the public domain, to examine the experience of the private individual within the social and personal spaces that have been created within the nation. Political will is subordinated to personal experience, and the idea of the nation as a large and all-encompassing construct has shifted to the background.

Chapters one and two, which deal with the building of the nation and the national identity in political terms have focused largely on male characters. Siew Chye and Reggie of the *Singapore Trilogy*, for example, take centre stage while Siew Hua is relegated to a secondary role as their helper and supporter. The nation as political entity is treated as being the proper sphere of men. In chapter three, however, the focus in the two plays selected is very much on the position of women. The concern in these plays is more with the cultural and personal sphere which, in the national imaginary, is closely connected with women rather than men. Chapter three is marked by a concern with the female sphere which is in contrast with the more masculinist, nationalist discourse of chapters one and two.
Chapter Three

Constructing Private Spaces in the National Arena: Rosnah and The Sandpit: Womansis

As an undergraduate at the University of Malaya, I never fit into the ‘Indian’ space which was authoritatively and socially deemed ‘suitable’ for me because I do not speak Tamil and am not Hindu, and because my friends were not exclusively ‘Indian.’ I have on occasion been berated by other Malaysian Indians for not speaking what is assumed to be ‘my’ language, that is, Tamil. Importantly, however, I have never felt awkward for not fitting into that space. I am aware that it was not designed with me and my experiences in mind. And yet, society’s dissatisfaction is turned against me, rather than against the imposed spaces. This demonstrates the extent to which racial, cultural and linguistic identities have been naturalised and internalised by the majority of Malaysians and Singaporeans, confining them to uncongenial public and private spaces. Attempts to step beyond these spaces often lead to isolation and ostracism, so that generally, it seems easier to simply comply, to fit in with the dominant modes of thought and behaviour. The two plays under consideration in this chapter demonstrate that simple compliance is not such a ‘simple’ matter after all – it can, in fact, lead to deep psychic unease.

This chapter will look at the public construction of, and individual negotiation with, spaces which are meant to be inhabited by individuals at the private level. This represents a significant move away from the themes considered in chapters one and two, where the focus was on the public and the political. In this chapter, the focus is on private figures and their inner lives, with discussions taking place at the level of culture rather than politics. Inevitably, however, we find that in the Singaporean play, the link between culture and the political construction of it is manifest and visible, whereas in the Malaysian play, politics is a less intrusive presence, with social pressure forming a much more palpable force. This is not to say, however, that political power is less significant in Malaysia. Rather, its workings are more apparent in the smaller country, where centralised control is more workable. In Malaysia, that same level of control has been devolved to individual racial groups; by constantly focusing on racial difference
as central to the political and cultural life of the country, for example by constituting racially-based political parties, Malaysia has ensured that race and culture are also central to all social interactions, thus subtly extending political control through social control.

Both plays also examine organic hybridity as an increasingly significant part of life in Malaysia and Singapore. What had been tentatively presented in chapter one as a possibility, a way of life that had the potential to include rather than exclude, is here seen as more of a reality. What becomes clearer here is the increasing difference between what Stuart Hall refers to as "the old, [...] the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'" which "can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland," and "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; [...] a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" ("Cultural Identity" 235). Engagement with the ancestral homeland is, despite official pressure, becoming less and less relevant as people begin to engage with the diversity and difference around them.

The main characters in both plays under consideration here are, undeniably, cultural hybrids. While in chapter one, a hybrid, inclusive identity was a goal to be deliberately worked toward, here it appears in the main characters as an organic outgrowth of life in Malaysia and Singapore. K. S. Maniam has commented on the multiplicity of influences which play on individuals within multiracial nations such as Malaysia and Singapore:

He is not only aware of his own culture but also of the cultures around him, and of those inherited through his education and reading. He therefore occupies several cultural spaces just as he does several imaginative spaces; and add to this his tendency to expose himself to and assimilate various forms of philosophical and literary discourses, and you have an almost complete profile of what I would like to call the new diasporic man. ("New Diaspora" 10)

Maniam presents this position as creative and active. However, this creativity is stymied by authoritative categorisation, as well as by individual interpellation within and internalisation of these constructed categories. Malaysians and Singaporeans are
exposed to myriad different cultural influences; but being officially enclosed and
categorised within essentialised racial, cultural and linguistic spaces, they cannot easily
access this multiplicity of influences. Thus their hybridity does not free them from the
racial and cultural spaces within which the state has enclosed them, and which have to
a large extent been normalised. The ‘dream’ presented in chapter one, which has in a
way been achieved here, has brought with it none of the hope and optimism visible in
the plays studied in that chapter. What we see instead is more of the cynicism which
was made apparent in chapter two, reflecting an increasingly pessimistic mood brought
on, twenty or more years after the staging of those first plays, by the relentlessly
intrusive, interventionist character of the state.

The focus in this chapter will be on Rosnah, by Haresh Sharma of Singaporean
theatre group The Necessary Stage (TNS), and The Sandpit: Womensis by Malaysian
playwright K. S. Maniam. Rosnah was initially devised by director Alvin Tan and
actress Alin Mosbit (who went on to play the protagonist Rosnah), and subsequently
scripted by Haresh Sharma; it was first staged at the Tampines Regional Library,
Singapore, in June 1995. It was developed further and then restaged at The Substation
Guinness Theatre, Singapore, in November 1996. Finally, it was staged at The Old
Market Theatre in Melbourne in July 1997, having undergone further revision and
development.¹ The Sandpit: Womensis (Sandpit) was first staged in Singapore at the
Black Box, in November 1990, by TheatreWorks, and then by Five Arts Centre (FAC)
at the British Council Kuala Lumpur in January 1991. Both productions were directed
by Krishen Jit.

The analysis will attempt to examine how in Malaysia and Singapore, racial and
cultural identities are constituted and regulated at the official level in such a way that
they constrict the individual’s personal spatial boundaries. Spaces are constructed at
the authoritative level, encompassing within their borders elements that are acceptable
to and allowable by the authorities; thus racial and cultural identities are produced by
and subjected to regulatory authority. However, boundaries are porous and the
individual can potentially redraw these borders, moving towards the creation of a more

¹ The script of the version staged in Melbourne was published in the collection This Chord and Others
(1999). For the purposes of this chapter, I am working with the published script, as well as with the
videotape of the 1996 performance at The Substation.
congenial, individually-constituted space. The plays discussed in the first chapter display less concern with personal spaces, as the fate of the emergent nation is seen to override the importance of individual fates. In the current chapter, however, the nation is viewed as a given; the greater concern now is with the individual and the spheres open to him or her. We might regard this acceptance of the existence of the nation as a positive; however, this is tempered by the expression of dissatisfaction with the shape taken by the nation and the spaces allotted to individuals within that shape. This dissatisfaction is especially evident among minority communities which are uncertain about or unhappy with their allotted spaces.

*Rosnah* and *Sandpit* focus on members of minority communities whose concerns are rarely aired in the public fora of their respective countries – a Singaporean Malay woman in *Rosnah*, and two Malaysian Tamil women in *Sandpit*. In both cases, the characters are shown to be psychically constrained by authoritative constructions of identity as being hemmed in by specific, narrow definitions of race, culture and religion. However, by appropriating the English language theatre as their arena of expression, both playwrights widen the spaces which would normally be allowed to their characters. The expression of minority concerns within a non-conventional framework (English rather than Malay or Tamil language theatre) suggests the transgression of boundaries and the re-construction of authoritative spaces. It also allows for communication across cultural and linguistic barriers, thus moving towards a more united and inclusive sense of community. These plays allow ‘outsiders’ to experience something of the life of a different racial/linguistic group; as experiences are shared, the imagined community grows larger and more inclusive. Thus the ‘space’ of the nation can also be reconfigured.

**Space as a performative construct**

The discussion of space will hinge largely on mental and psychic space rather than on physical or geographical place, though these will also bear some discussion. Following the work of many theorists, I draw a distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place.’ Gay McAuley distinguishes ‘space’ as something “always in some sense open, not yet determined, while place is real, already shaped, and endowed with value” (“Place” 601); space is abstract, while place refers to something more specific.
In theorising space as performatively constituted, I draw on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who suggests in *The Production of Space* that space is a mental construct created or produced by will and power. His arguments bear similarities with Butler's formulation of gender identity as performative, in that Lefebvre denies space as a pre-existing essence, while connecting the construction of it directly to the exercise of power. I will also consider the theatre and stage as physical sites of staging, in order to examine how physical staging has the potential to open up new psychic spaces. For this, I turn mainly to McAuley's *Space in Performance*, a study of the semiotics of space in theatre, from which I extrapolate that theatre spaces can constitute meaning, and can therefore be considered performative in more than just the sense of being concerned with stage performance.

Michał Kobialka focuses on the increasing importance of abstract notions of space from the late nineteenth century onwards. Relative space eventually displaced absolute space in the realm of physics, although more quotidian understandings still focus on absolute space, a concept too powerfully lodged to be wholly displaced (559). Despite advances in physics, then, our common conception of space is that it is a physical area which exists, unquestionably and absolutely, prior to our occupation of it.

Lefebvre challenges this notion, stating instead that space is "a 'mental thing'" (3). He further defines space as "not a thing but rather a set of relations between things" (83). Space is a fluid concept which can be created through mental rather than physical processes, and a mental space can exist where a physical place perhaps does not. Lefebvre acknowledges that this is a difficult concept to process, "so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it" (15). This idea of the *a priori* empty space springs from our illusory conviction that space is 'natural' rather than externally constituted. Instead, Lefebvre suggests that what we consider "'real' space" (14), the space which we inhabit daily, is in fact the space created by social practice, so that "*(social) space is a (social) product*" (26). Similarly, Butler asserts that 'real' gender identities are socially produced and normalised within

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2 In this context we might consider the creation of racial enclaves in Malaya; to some extent these were physical places set up and encouraged by the colonial administration. More important was the sense of mental separation that was fostered by the creation of separate spaces for different races – the various races, though physically located in one geographical area, mentally inhabited separate spaces.
society for specific ends. The ‘real’ space within which individuals interact as social beings is a construct, constituted by the demands or needs of that society.

As Lefebvre points out, abstract space “is both a result and a container, both produced and productive” (288); produced in accordance with the particular needs of a dominating authority, it is also productive, in that it constitutes individuals in certain ways. In other words, space can be regulatory, conferring power on the constituting authority. Social space functions as a vital element in power struggles – specifically, the power struggles of the state over the individual. Lefebvre explicitly says that control is the state’s central aim: the state desires “spaces which they can organise according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an a priori condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them” (85). Lefebvre suggests here that the state produces spaces specific to its own requirements. Space, then, is the result of performative constitution, in much the same way as is identity. It is externally constituted, to further specific social aims.

Lefebvre goes on to state that: “Power aspires to control space in its entirety” (388). If we read ‘power’ as ‘the state,’ then the state seeks to control not only the physical place constituted by its borders, but also the mental spaces inhabited by its citizens. Thus the individual citizen is not allowed, in an officially recognised context, to form his or her own racial, linguistic or cultural ‘space,’ but must fit into the space already constructed by the state. While this suggests that the state is dominant, Lefebvre does acknowledge that there is potential for the failure, in performative terms, of authoritatively-inscribed spaces. Lefebvre asserts that the subject, while being constructed within particular spaces, can also deconstruct, even reconstruct those spaces: “This pre-existence of space conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance; yet the subject’s presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it” (57). For the subject, space is pre-existent insofar as it has been constituted by the dominant authority; however, the subject, by his or her very existence, can challenge and disrupt such constructed spaces, resisting interpellation within them. Lefebvre contends that “new social relationships call for a new space, and vice versa” (59), suggesting that there is a certain openness, a potential for change, in the formation of spaces. If
individuals placed in a specific space do not relate to it as ‘real,’ if they do not accept it as their “space of social practice” (Lefebvre 14), then authoritatively-constituted space will remain nothing more than an ideology.

Individual constitution of space – which implies a rejection, or at least a questioning, of official space – can be creatively disruptive, even in states which exercise a high level of control. Clammer notes that most Singaporeans are required, as part of day-to-day living, to inhabit at least two different spheres, which he defines as “macro-level” and “micro-level” (Race 46), the maintenance of which allows for the simultaneous expression of a public or national identity, and a private cultural identity (Race 67). This suggests that Singapore has achieved a balance between “dominated” or state-produced spaces, and “appropriated” or individually-produced spaces (Lefebvre 164), in other words that the state-created space of social practice has been successfully inscribed and internalised. However, this balance can tip over into imbalance, with ruptures caused by unaccepting individuals.

The Performative Potential of Theatrical Space

Stage space can be used as an active tool in the reconfiguration of authoritatively-constituted spaces. McAuley posits the existence of three different spaces in any stage production. These are the “presentational space,” which is “the physical use made of this stage space in any given performance” (Space 29), the “fictional place” which “refers to the place or places presented, represented or evoked onstage and off” (Space 29 - 30), and finally the “thematic space,” where “the way the space is conceived and organised, the kinds of space that are shown and/or evoked, the values and events associated with them, and the relationship between them are always of fundamental importance in the meaning conveyed” (Space 32). McAuley’s theorisation of theatrical space as one which can be “conceived and organised” in order to ‘show’ or ‘evoke’ makes it clear that significance can be inscribed on, or ascribed to, a particular space by the conscious desire of the person designing it, as well as by those looking at it. In this sense, then, theatrical space can be performative: the presentational

3 Although Clammer writes in the context of Singapore, many of his arguments are applicable to the situation in Malaysia.
space can have a specific thematic role to play, and can in fact be an active element in constructing meaning.

Marvin Carlson has pointed out that technology (video and computer technology, for example) has introduced fascinating new possibilities as to how space can be presented, and indeed which spaces can be shown; he notes that "the traditional idea of performance space is disappearing as well, to be replaced by a wide range of interactive real and digital spaces" ("Video" 614). Director Krishen Jit played with the presentational spaces available to him for the stagings of Sandpit. Likewise, Haresh Sharma and director Alvin Tan reconfigured stage space, and also experimented with the use of video to comment on Rosnah's situation. This chapter will therefore look at innovative use of the stage space — for example, reconfiguring familiar spaces to disrupt audience expectations, or demanding behaviour from the audience which would normally be considered at odds with 'going to the theatre' as a social event — to bring together small social spaces which do not usually meet in the larger national spaces of Malaysia and Singapore.

'Malay' Spaces in Singapor: Rosnah

The script of Rosnah is based in part on a journal kept by Alin Mosbit during a stay in Glasgow, recording her experiences as an Asian foreigner. The character of Rosnah was created during improvisations (led by Alvin Tan) based on the experiences recorded in this journal. The transcriptions of these improvisations were then sent to Sharma who, says Tan, "wrote the first draft of the script, contributing his feelings and perceptions of living in a foreign country for a period of time [...]. When Rosnah was re-staged in November 1996, I could give my input of staying away from Singapore" ("Introduction" x). Thus, although apparently dealing with the dilemma of one Malay woman, it also encompasses the experiences of the Indian playwright and the Chinese director — a neat, though doubtless unintentional, cross-section of Singapore's three main racial groups. The multiple construction process which the character Rosnah undergoes, presided over by the 'authority figures' of writer, director and actor, is reminiscent of the external constitution of identity by the state. However, the creative

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4 Sadly, Jit passed away on 30th April 2005.
5 The integration of audio-visual technology with more traditional use of the stage space is also used in the
process undergone by Sharma, Tan and Mosbit clearly depends on negotiation, discussion and exploration of individual experience, rather than on the top-down imposition of identity as practised by the authorities. The willingness and ability displayed by Tan, Mosbit and Sharma to explore and counter official constructions with their personal constructions suggests individual power and agency. The mode of development of the play underlines the potential of intentionally hybrid, border-crossing collaborations, still an undervalued phenomenon in essentialist Singapore.6

In Rosnah the protagonist, a Malay woman, has gone to London for her university studies, her parents in Singapore having invested all their savings in her education. While in England, she meets up with an old friend, Muslinda, who seems to have shed all traces of ‘Singaporean-ness,’ preferring to assimilate into English youth culture. Rosnah also enters into a relationship with Stephen, an English postgraduate student. Like the students in Yeo’s Are You There?, she seems uncertain of what Singapore has to offer her, and of what her position within the nation might be.

Rosnah’s lack of certainty about her ‘space’ reflects the uncertainty felt by many Malays about their position in Singapore. They have been constructed in particular ways which leave them socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged, placing them on the outer edges of Singapore’s prosperity and advancement. A very small percentage of Malays complete their ‘A’-levels, a prerequisite for entering university, while a disproportionately large percentage are employed in low-income jobs (clerical positions, security guards, drivers and so on). They are, in a very literal way, dispersed to the margins of Singaporean society. Alfi an Sa’at and Lily Rahim (both high-achieving Singaporean Malays) assert that this marginality is, in the eyes of the state, a direct result of the ingrained inability and lack of the Malay community. Rahim, for instance, explains the state’s adherence to the “cultural deficit thesis,” which “posits that socially disadvantaged ethnic communities have remained economically and educationally marginal primarily because of their negative values and generally moribund attitudes” (3). Since Singapore advertises itself as a meritocracy, in which the cream rises to the top purely through its own ability and

plays to be discussed in Chapters four and five.

6 Hybridity and border-crossing in the form of intercultural theatre are discussed in detail in chapter five.
effort, the disadvantaged position of the Malays is treated as being 'natural' and therefore not the fault of the state or its policies.

Rahim, however, notes that Singapore Malays are aware of "the salience of institutional factors in contributing to their socio-economic, educational, and political marginality" (3). Poet and playwright Alfian Sa’at, speaking at a forum on representation, points out that "this whole thing about being Malay is very much a social construct [...] and is still a site of contestation" ("Who’s Afraid" 32). ‘Malayness’ is a nebulous term apparently still in the process of negotiation.

Yet it is not treated as such in Singapore. As in Malaysia, the term is not widely and generally inclusive. However, while in Malaysia the exclusiveness of the term works to the advantage of the Malays, in Singapore it is restrictive, allowing them only the narrowest of social spaces within which to live. This narrowness is reflected in the common responses to Malays in Singapore, such as Lee Kuan Yew’s firm belief in "environmental determinism" where the people of more tropical climates are deemed to be of less hardy stock than those whose ancestors have braved much harsher meteorological insults" ("Who’s Afraid" 31), an oblique way of extending the colonial myth of the ‘lazy native’ and contrasting them with the hardworking peasants who migrated from China. Malay backwardness and marginality have been politically constituted, so that Chinese political and economic dominance is not only not questioned, but is seen as being entirely natural; Raj Vasil, for example, states that: “It is only natural for the Chinese then to view Singapore more and more as being their country and to want to assert themselves as the dominant majority” (Asianising 4).²

In order to carry out this program, there was a need to de-emphasise the indigeneity and special position of the Malays in Singapore. Singaporean Malays have been subtly constructed as not quite belonging in Singapore. Most histories of Singapore present the island as largely uninhabited before the arrival of Stamford

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² Raj Vasil provides an interesting perspective on the decreasingly Malay and increasingly Chinese character of Singapore, stating that with political changes in the region in the 1980s, “Singapore did not feel threatened. In view of these changes, it did not seem necessary for Singapore any more to continue to de-emphasise and disguise its Chineseness to the extent that it had been compelled to since 1965, following separation from Malaysia” (Asianising 66-7). This underlines the political expediency of the decisions made by the PAP in the wake of independence, and shows that Singapore has from early on been imagined as a Chinese state.
Raffles, and attribute its present-day success to the hard work of migrants from China (and to a much lesser extent India). While there is some acknowledgment of the presence of Malays on the island in pre-modern times, this acknowledgment in fact serves to relegate them to a distant, even primitive, past which bears little relation to the dynamic modern success story that is Singapore. The myth of modern Singapore does not accord the Malays any significant space, and Malay indigeneity is not seriously acknowledged.

A fundamental threat to the position of the Malays in Singapore comes from official reactions to their adherence to tradition and religion. Despite state rhetoric about the danger of deculturisation, Malay adherence to culture is seen as showing potential disloyalty to the state, as Hill and Lian have noted: “In recent years, there has been much public discussion on the question of Malay loyalty to the nation,” with the government accusing “the Malays of disloyalty for protesting against the visit of the Israeli President in 1986” (170). The loyalty of the Malays to their religion, which in this instance led them to protest against the visit of the Israeli President, was used as a tool to construct them as primarily Muslims rather than Singaporeans, and therefore suspect and potentially disloyal to the nation. Rahim writes on a personal level of her own uncertainty about where she belongs: “Like many Malay Singaporeans living under the weight and shadows of these negative ethnic stereotypes, my sense of identity, self-esteem, and rootedness in the land of my birth was shaken” (vii). Nominally called Singaporeans, the Malay community seems uncertain about the space it inhabits in Singapore. Their own belief that they have belonged from ancient times to Singapore as part of the Nusantara is shaken by the authoritative performative construction of them as barely clinging to the margins of Singapore society.

In Rosnah, Sharma creates a character for whom the authoritatively-produced identity and the concomitant narrowly-bordered space are restrictive in many ways. She struggles with the identity that has been imposed on her. She has been conditioned to accept it as normal, but the uneasiness of her own experience suggests that the identity is problematic.

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8 Similar protests were held in Malaysia against the visit to Singapore, but there it would have been seen as only natural, given that Islam is the official religion, and solidarity with other Muslims therefore a given.

9 Refer to introduction, p. 20 for a discussion of the concept of Nusantara.
Rosnah is an interesting play in the Singaporean context, being one of the very few plays written in English to deal with the position occupied by Malays in Singapore society. While many plays are written in the Malay language, these texts and performances are restricted almost exclusively to a Malay audience; issues relevant to Malay society are not, therefore, given wide theatrical airing. Sa’at also points out that in the English-language theatre, general acceptance of stereotyped views of Malays results in the treatment of Malay characters either as negative stock characters or with “a certain kind of sarcasm” (“Who’s Afraid” 33). Where does this kind of stock portrayal leave them, in their search for a space in Singapore? In the theatre such portrayals as those noted by Sa’at signal fail to accord the Malay community with a congenial space in Singapore society. However, he goes on to single out Rosnah as a rare example of an English-language play which explores “a lot of very specific Malay issues” (“Who’s Afraid” 35), without the sarcastic stock portrayals.

The play deals centrally with the uncertainty and confusion Rosnah feels as she moves between the familiar space of Singapore and the wider space of London. Told in a non-realistic mode, using non-linear time, Rosnah’s story is framed by the narration and commentary provided by a character called The Actress, who critiques and comments on Rosnah’s plight and the decisions she makes. The Actress (as a character) should not be conflated with the performer who takes on the role. Rosnah, in trying to come to terms with her situation, makes frequent reference to the past in the form of her grandmother (Nenek), and legendary Malay warrior-queen Siti Zubaidah. She also sees the dangers of her current situation in the form of her friend Muslinda, another Singaporean-Malay woman, who abandons herself completely to the social and cultural scene in London. The entire play is undertaken by a single performer.

Rosnah feels confusion as different spaces – private, authoritatively mediated, social, cultural – all collide, leaving her uncertain as to which space she should, or even can, inhabit. Having to grapple with her construction as a Malay woman in Singapore, she finds that her sphere remains small and constrictive. The geographical place is significant, as constitution of Malay identity in Malaysia is significantly different. As a

10 Although Malay is still officially considered the National Language of Singapore, it is only the Malay community which speaks it with any degree of fluency. Most others are unlikely to speak it except at a very basic level. Even those who have studied it at school as a second language will probably not have a
Singaporean Malay Rosnah is, like her counterparts across the Causeway, enclosed within a particular religious space (Muslim) and a cultural space (female, required to maintain religiously and socially mandated standards of modesty and decency). However, where Malaysian Malays are officially empowered by their status as Bumiputras, Rosnah’s position as a Singaporean Malay encloses her within spaces where power and agency are socially lacking: she is marginalised, responsible for helping her ‘underachieving’ race, potentially disloyal to the state because of overriding loyalty to culture and religion. Her inability to make this authoritative construct jibe with the reality of her personal life engenders confusion and uncertainty, which is represented in the play as a state of being “in transit” (Rosnah 171), or between fixed spaces.

When the play opens, Rosnah is literally in transit, on her way from Singapore to London. Later in the play we again find her in transit, this time heading back from London to Singapore. This first physical journey represents her transition from the narrow psychic space of Singapore to the wider spaces available in London, away from parental, societal and governmental supervision. Rosnah is somewhat like Siew Hua in Are You There?, suddenly confronted with a far more open and less ordered world than has hitherto been available. Unlike Siew Hua, however, she hesitates to cross from one world to the other. Being in transit, she inhabits an interstitial space (Bhabha, Location 4), a space of both uncertainty and potential agency. The physical experience of being in transit functions as a metaphor for Rosnah’s own uncertainty as well as her apparent inability to achieve individual agency. She should be taking the step from one space to another, from an officially regulated to an individually defined space of existence. Instead, she finds herself in an indeterminate space where “you can’t move because your hand luggage is so heavy” (Rosnah 171). Still carrying the heavy spiritual and cultural baggage she has brought from Singapore, she remains in transit. In this case, however, the phrase does not refer to movement from one place to another. Rather, Rosnah appears to be stuck in this one space.

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11 The Causeway is a bridge linking Singapore and Malaysia across the Straits of Johor.
12 Roziah Omar notes that some Islamic ideologies posit women as being less able to reason, weak, and overly emotional, and therefore in need of special care and protection (7).
Rosnah questions why her spaces must be fixed. She asks: “Why should I stay in one place and do one thing?” (*Rosnah* 184). Her society (and, by extension, the state) requires that she adhere to her construction as a Malay woman from Singapore. She actually violates this requirement by forming a relationship with Stephen, an Englishman, despite knowing how negative the reactions of her family and society will be. She imagines what would happen if she were to bring Stephen to Singapore, to introduce him to her family:

**ROSNAH:** [...] Mak will say, ‘ah...’ Ayah will say, ‘Rokok mana... rokok...’
Rashid will be in the room guessing who will collapse first, Mak or Ayah. And Nenek... Nenek will be in her wheelchair, [In Malay.] ‘Kina, who is that white man? So tall.’ And all the neighbours will be at the corridor, trying to look inside through the window... whispering... [In Malay.] ‘Rosnah has come back with a white boyfriend... yes, white... he looks like Michael Bolton...Hah! Michael Bolton? Rosnah is marrying Michael Bolton...? When is she getting married? Hah? She’s pregnant...?’ (*Rosnah* 182 - 183)

Most Singaporeans would be familiar with the physically cramped HDB flats which are home to the majority of the population, and so the image of the whispering, gossiping neighbours crowding the narrow corridor vividly brings to mind the suffocating pressure which can be brought to bear by a small and relatively isolated community. Rosnah ultimately breaks off the relationship because she finds she cannot challenge the strictures placed on her. She tests the borders set around her by social expectation and regulation, but does not break through them to construct a more accommodating private space for herself.

Rosnah adheres to social constitution of her identity, unlike the Actress. Where Rosnah hesitates to start a relationship with a white man, the Actress declares that put in the same position, she would “attack” (*Rosnah* 175). Since the Actress is, like

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13 *Mak* and *Ayah* are Malay terms for ‘mother’ and ‘father’. “Rokok mana... rokok...” translates as “Where are the cigarettes... cigarettes...”.

14 ‘HDB’ is an acronym for ‘Housing Development Board,’ which after independence took responsibility for providing cheap and plentiful housing. The result was the ubiquitous ‘HDB flats,’ the massive blocks of small but functional flats which characterise the Singapore landscape today.
Rosnah, a Malay woman, her willingness to go against the grain points to the importance of performance in the constitution of identity – an identity is real only in so far as it is performed. The Actress undercuts the inscriptive force of the prescribed Malay female identity by performing beyond socially-mandated borders. Through her disruptive (even aggressive) behaviour, she creates a more flexible private space than state or society will allow her.

According to reviewer Julian Lim, the use of one actor to take on the various characters is appropriate as this is a play “that concerns itself with identity, the making of it, and the problems of it. And so not only are Maslinda [sic] and the rest refracted through Rosnah’s eyes, but Rosnah herself is constructed by Alin the actress ... and, as she reminds us, by the audience as well.”¹⁵ The script requires the performer to take on five distinct roles, thus setting up resonances at a textual level. This is then taken to a further level in performance: as the audience watches the performer moving from one character to another, often interacting with the audience along the way, asking for their input and opinions, there is a sense not only of watching a character being made, but also of participating in the making of that character. Any sense of the existence of an essential, internal identity is disrupted by the process of ‘making’ Rosnah.

The presence of the state as a constructor of identity always looms in the background, despite the suggestion that individuals can potentially constitute their own performative selves. The Actress frequently intervenes in the script, for example asking the audience what they think of relationships, leading into a discussion of Rosnah’s relationship with Stephen (Rosnah 175 – 176). This is almost Forum theatre (a form with which The Necessary Stage has experimented¹⁶), except that rather than allowing the audience’s suggestions to guide her future actions, Rosnah answers back, defending her own choices.

However, it is easy to question whether the choices she makes are in fact her own, or are dominated by state and societal expectations. She has internalised the

¹⁵ I would suggest that in the writing of the play, Rosnah has been constructed by Alin Mosbit, in collaboration with Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma. In performance, however, the performer is no longer involved in this construction. It is the Actress as character, rather than “Alin the actress,” who appears to construct Rosnah.
¹⁶ See chapter two for a brief discussion of Forum Theatre in Singapore. Also see Peterson, Theater p. 44 – 50, and Lo, Staging Nation, p. 44 – 45.
Authoritative identity to such an extent that it governs her actions and reactions. She recites angry little diatribes about her ‘underachieving’ race, stating that as one of the few Malays to make it not only to university, but to university overseas, she has an obligation to return and help her people better themselves. She also feels an obligation as a dutiful Muslim daughter to uphold her family’s honour:

ROSNAH: I’m here to study. My parents are sacrificing a lot for my education. So I cannot... I cannot anyhow go out, get boyfriend... ang mo boyfriend somemore.17 You think what... then I become like Mus is it? Miss Exotica. Miss Venezuela. What will people say? This is London. But still got Singaporeans. It’s not about whether he’s Muslim or not. My priorities must be correct. It’s not easy for me to come here. It’s not easy for Malay girl to go university. Foreign university somemore. You can discuss but you are not me. You don’t understand. When I go back, I must contribute to society. [sic] (Rosnah 176).

It is significant that in this speech, she does not refer at any point to her own desires. She cites her parents and their sacrifice, other Singaporeans in London who might ‘say’ something, her duty to contribute to society. Her idea of what she must do with her life is governed entirely by external, authoritative constructions of who she is. Thus, even though she has moved to a new physical/geographical space, the authoritative constitution of her identity is so dominant that she carries with her the social and psychic borders which have been set for her.

Rosnah’s inability to step beyond these mental spaces means that she is unlike her two role models, Nenek and Siti Zubaidah, the legendary warrior-queen. She has left Singapore, but remains mentally and spiritually ‘grounded,’ a word which here suggests that she is stuck rather than secure. Nenek, who grew up in colonial Malaya before coming to Singapore after her marriage, and Siti Zubaidah, who left her realm to search for her captured husband, are able to physically travel, but more important is their ability to widen their mental and spiritual borders.

17 Ang Mo, literally meaning ‘red headed’, is a Hokkien word for whites; it has been adopted into Singaporean English.
Nenek, Siti Zubaidah and Rosnah are all travellers, but only Rosnah is unable to reach her spiritual destination. The Actress relates their travels to the Islamic concept of *Hijrah* or pilgrimage. She quotes from a religious commentary which states that: “One tries to change a situation and to improve it; when one cannot, then one must leave it behind” (*Rosnah* 181 - 182). The instruction seems clear enough – if Rosnah cannot change or improve the situation at home (that is, if she cannot work within the authority-constructed space allotted to her) she should leave it behind, perhaps to create a space that can accommodate her needs and desires. However, she remains ‘grounded’ within her narrow space, unlike Nenek and Siti Zubaidah.

Nenek’s migration to Singapore comes about as a result of her marriage. Her description of the event highlights its celebratory aspects: “The wedding... three days and three nights got joget lambak” (*Rosnah* 174). Her departure for Singapore does not occasion the kind of trauma experienced by Rosnah when she goes to London. At the time of Nenek’s marriage, well before Singapore’s ejection from Malaya in 1965, Singapore and Malaya would have been considered one country. Nenek inhabits simpler spaces, less affected by the political and economic drives behind Singapore’s modern construction of identity.

Siti Zubaidah performs an epic journey which completely violates the borders within which she would, as a woman, be enclosed. In the course of her journey to free her husband from his captors, she disguises herself as a man (and is apparently accepted as one), thus disrupting her constituted gender identity. She gives birth, but leaves the infant in the forest as she cannot care for him on her journey. Despite this, the baby thrives, and there are suggestions of future reconciliation between mother and child. Not only does she not prioritise her role as mother, the legend as retold here does not judge or condemn her decision. She is thus not constrained by the construction of women as beings who feel the biological imperative to nurture their children. However she does not completely reject the role of mother; rather, she looks forward to taking on the role again when she is ready. Thus she reshapes the socio-cultural space inhabited by women as mothers. And finally, she becomes a successful warrior, her husband is dependent on her for his freedom. This challenges the view of women as submissive

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18 *Joget lambak* is a popular Malay dance.
agents of peace and domesticity. Thus Siti Zubaidah's journey to rescue her husband ruptures borders and reshapes authoritatively-constituted spaces.

Such empowering opportunities do not seem to be available to Rosnah. As a Malay woman in modern Singapore she seems, ironically, to have less autonomy than Siti Zubaidah. In modern Singapore, the construction of Malays as Muslims has placed greater constraints on female spaces, demanding modesty and chastity, and defining these concepts narrowly; in modern terms, for example, Siti Zubaidah would have transgressed the rules of modesty, first by disguising herself as a man and then by taking an active part in war. Rosnah is strongly governed by the more limiting definitions that Siti Zubaidah rejects. Thus when Muslinda tells Rosnah that she has been raped, Rosnah hysterically shrieks that it happened because she had strayed from her religious path (Rosnah 188). Rosnah's reaction to Muslinda's news is sparked in part by the knowledge that she herself has overstepped the official boundaries of allowable behaviour by forming a relationship with Stephen, a non-Malay and a non-Muslim. Muslinda's fate seems to be an extreme reflection of what might happen to Rosnah if she does not remain within the set borders.

Rosnah's relationship with Stephen can also be read on a symbolic level as representing the problematic position of the West and Western culture in Singapore. Singapore assiduously cultivates economic and political relationships with the West, and has adopted English as the de facto national language. Yet Western culture, which has always been a part of modern Singapore, is viewed as a negative element, to be rejected and overcome through a tenacious clinging to Asian culture and values. In deciding whether or not to continue the relationship, Rosnah is also deciding how far within the borders of her space (clearly but reductively labeled as 'Asian') this external, 'Western' element can intrude. Such intrusion would re-shape her borders, creating a new identity and space. The confusion Rosnah displays as the play progresses suggests the difficulty she faces in maintaining the essentialised space and identity that the authorities have produced for her. Yet she appears to have no resources with which to challenge or negotiate that space.

Within the confines of the text, it appears that Rosnah and The Actress both dwindle away, so that even the feisty Actress gives up her attempts to make Rosnah
venture beyond her borders, telling her to “forget it, lah. Go home. Just go home” (Rosnah 190). Rosnah discovers that Nenek, Siti Zubaidah and the Actress all exist within her, suggesting that their strength is a part of her. Siti Zubaidah tells her that “I only did what my heart told me to do” (Rosnah 190); but Rosnah is unable to follow her example, and at the end of the play is hysterical and confused. The Actress, seeming protective of her, shouts at the audience to get out and stop staring at her. Her final words, before a Narrator cuts in, are: “What are you looking at?” (Rosnah 191); a pertinent question indeed, as by this time, with the performer jumping from character to character, the audience would be unsure about which character they are actually watching. All the characters seem now to inhabit a single body, but there is no sense of union; rather, the effect is of fragmentation and disruption, so that both Rosnah and the Actress seem disempowered and uncertain. However, some sense of individual performative power comes through in the actual staging of the play.

One interesting point which comes across in the staging is the treatment of the Malay language, ostensibly the national language, but unfamiliar to the majority of younger Singaporeans. Minor parts of the dialogue here are in Malay, a point which is not clear in the printed script, as it is written entirely in English, with only stage directions to indicate which sections are to be spoken in Malay. For the monolingual (English-speaking) reader, then, there is no real barrier to understanding. When spoken, however, the problems inherent in any bilingual production become apparent. One reviewer noted that the use of Malay left many audience members in the dark (Julian Lim 3). By not translating or glossing all of the Malay dialogue, TNS centralised the Malayness of the play and left the non-Malays (or at least the non-Malay speakers) on the margins. This play, therefore, points to a kind of theatrical performativity in which the performance of the play constructs and centralises a different, disruptive identity from that created by the state. Here, it is Malay identity which is central, while non-Malays are left lost and somewhat bewildered.

Director Alvin Tan’s staging of the text reveals strategies which counter and disrupt official performativities. This is particularly visible in the use made of the stage space or, in McAuley’s terms, the presentational space. Singaporean reviewer
Samantha Santa Maria describes the set and audience seating configuration for the performance of *Rosnah*:

Thin straw mats were lined up on the right and left sides of the auditorium for the audience to seat themselves, separated by a narrow walkway lined by short bamboo sticks, on which several candles rested. So the audience was divided into two groups, one facing the other, separated by the walkway which was the area in which Mosbit gave her performance.

There is nothing on stage to suggest a specific locale: no set dressing, for example, to indicate Rosnah’s London bedsit, or her parent’s home. Rather, the stage is left fluid and flexible, defined only by the use made of it by the performer. The flickering candlelight creates a sense of intimacy increased by the fact that the audience sit facing each other – an arrangement which facilitates the kind of eye contact and potential for communication not available with more conventional seating styles. It is also worth noting that, following Singapore’s essentialist constructions of race which demand that each ‘race’ belong to a particular, well-defined ‘culture,’ candles are usually linked with the Malay culture rather than the Chinese or Indian cultures. Thus the presence of a candle-lined walkway specifically suggests the entrance to a Malay person’s home.

The intimacy created by the candlelight is further enhanced by the fact that audience members were required to remove their shoes before stepping onto the mats. It is common practice in Singapore for people to remove their shoes before entering a house. By bringing this social practice into a formal public space such as the theatre, the director ruptures expected behaviour and normal social relationships. Removal of shoes in this formal space leaves the audience feeling unsettled and vulnerable; thus, the usual power relationships between actor and audience are disrupted, and the entire audience can then be drawn more intimately into Rosnah’s story. The practice also physically and mentally relocates the audience into a particular fictional space (McAuley, *Space* 29) – a Malay home. Borders set up at the official level (between races, for example) can thus be violated and made permeable at the theatrically performative level. The restructuring of the presentational space creates a thematic

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19 Chinese culture is linked with lanterns, Indian culture with small oil lamps.
space which foregrounds the Malays in ways in which they are not normally foregrounded in Singapore.

As mentioned earlier, advances in audio-visual technology have allowed for the expansion of stage space through the use of video, slides, computers and so on. Alvin Tan put such technology to significant use in the Melbourne production of *Rosnah*:

“With the help of overhead projectors, we managed to include portraits of Singaporean Malays, pie-charts illustrating their social status, texts from the Koran, various Malay proverbs, and even a historical text of a colonist’s perception of Malays” ("Necessary Practice" 263). The multi-media aspect of their production focuses on physical, economic, religious and cultural representations of Singapore Malays, widening the reference so that Rosnah’s plight helps to reflect and foreground the plight of the Singapore Malays in general. Their social position is highlighted – physically embodied in the person of the performer, and underlined by the Brechtian use of photographs, texts, and projectors. Carlson notes that: “Surrounding the auditorium is the ‘real world’ from which the spectators come and to which they will return after the performance” (“Video” 616). What Tan does by visually highlighting the world of the Singaporean Malay is to bring that “real world” inside, from outside the auditorium.
However an even more important point is that he is bringing in a part of that 'real world' which is often not recognised, or which does not form a part of the world of the majority of Singaporeans. He thus expands the space of Malay representation on stage; at the same time, by forcing the audience to acknowledge Malay space, he is also expanding their world to include 'others' of whom they would not normally be especially aware.

Perhaps the most interesting use of space in this play comes in the way that the body of the lone performer is framed. She draws attention to her position as a performer: the stage directions suggest that she should point out the set to the audience or chat with the stage manager (Rosnah 172). The audience is thus constantly and deliberately made aware of the whole performance as performance, and attention is focused on the issue of identity as something performed. Initially, the Actress's brash confidence suggests that she enjoys a degree of autonomy in performing her own identity, and making it different. She, like Rosnah, is a Singaporean Malay, but she stresses repeatedly that she would not behave the way Rosnah does. If we take Rosnah to be symbolic of the individual on whom the authoritatively-constructed identity has been successfully inscribed, then the Actress is the individual who challenges and disrupts that identity.

However, this statement of difference is undermined by the fact that these differing characters are embodied within a single physical space: the body of the performer. The Actress points to this complexity when she says “I am not Rosnah. I am Rosnah. I am also Nene. I am me. I am the other. And we are all one” (Rosnah 177). How much credence can we give to the Actress's declaration of autonomy, if she is also Rosnah? On the other hand, if Rosnah and the Actress are one, is there not some possibility that Rosnah too will produce a disruptive identity? Can the word 'Actress' be read in two ways: firstly to refer to one who constructs an identity through performance; and secondly as one who takes action?

At the same time, however, we are reminded of the power of the state to control space in all its manifestations. At the end of the published version of the play the final words belong to an unseen (and hitherto unheard) Narrator, who narrates the Actress's movements, referring to her in the third person. Up to this point, it has appeared that
the Actress has had some measure of control over the performance. However, the sudden intrusion of the narrator changes this; he uses words to define and control the Actress’s movements, and removes her from the arena of direct individual action by putting her verbally into the third person, thus turning her from choosing subject to controlled object. The disembodied voice of the Narrator is impersonal and Big Brother-like, faceless and controlling, and can be read as symbolic of state control over individual space. It also comes back to the idea of performative construction of identity, with the Narrator’s voice serving to remind us that there is an external force constructing and controlling the movements and actions of the characters. These reminders also suggest that ultimately, there is no individual agency to be found here. Singaporeans cannot seem to escape from the issue of state domination.

It is significant that the dominant state is vocalised as being male. Recalling Bohmer’s view of the ways in which male and female bodies are used metaphorically in the construction of the nation, it becomes clear that in Rosnah, the female is passive, controlled by the dominant (male) authorities. Rosnah’s fears and worries centre around herself as a bearer of culture; agency ultimately resides in the (male) state. When political questions are centralised in the plays studied in previous chapters, the focus is on the male protagonist, such as Chye, Reggie, Birch, or Sultan Abdullah. It would appear that women are sidelined from political participation – an authoritative construction which appears to have been internalised to the point that in these plays, the women are confined to the space of domestic, familial and cultural concerns. While no male characters appear in Rosnah, the state as dominant presence is very much male. If the state is the male principle in this binary equation, does this then mean that the individuals within the state are the female principle? Has the state effectively feminised its populace by withholding political power and agency?

The following section on Maniam’s play also deals with the positioning of women as submissive bearers of culture, subjugated by the dominant male authority.

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20 In the video recording of the 1996 production, the voice is male.
21 The Big Brother image occurs several times in the English-language theatre of Malaysia and Singapore – for example, in Robert Yeo’s Changi, as well as in Kee Thuan Chye’s 1984 Here and Now. While it may just point to the pervasive influence of Orwell’s novel, it also strongly suggests individual perceptions of the dominant and intrusive presence of the state.
figure. However, this dominance is disrupted by the configuring of new spaces in which women form strong linkages with each other.

‘Indian’ Spaces in Malaysia: The Sandpit: Womensis

K. S. Maniam’s play displays more hope for the realisation of a hybrid, individually-produced identity that is relatively unmediated by authority. However this identity still remains enclosed within a small, racially-named space. State domination is not as intrusive a presence in this play, but the fact remains that currently-accepted racial groupings are the result of state policy. The racial environment of The Sandpit: Womensis is much narrower than that of Rosnah. Where the Singaporean play was a multi-racial collaboration, Maniam’s play is mono-racial. Written by a Malaysian Indian, it focuses completely on a specific part of the Indian community, with ‘other’ races marginally referred to but never seen. Does this suggest that such expansiveness and openness as are visible in this play, are viable only within narrow racial boundaries? Is the optimism mentioned earlier, then, merely illusory, achievable only within authoritatively-produced spaces?

Like Rosnah, The Sandpit: Womensis is a play that has undergone change and development over its performance history. It started as a monologue entitled The Sandpit, which was staged at the British Council, Kuala Lumpur, in May 1988 as a workshop performance. The story in the monologue is told entirely by one character, Santha. Maniam felt that this might present a narrow, skewed viewpoint. Thus the monologue evolved into a duologue, now entitled The Sandpit: Womensis, a title which conveys the idea that “the larger sense of sisterhood between women is explored” (Maniam, “Preface” xiv). This point marks a different approach to that visible in Rosnah where, despite articulations of female togetherness (with Siti Zubaidah, the Actress, and Nenek all claiming to be ‘within’ her), Rosnah remains isolated, unable to reach out to and benefit from their support. In Sandpit, the two female protagonists,

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22 An earlier version of this section was presented as a paper at the Association for Asian Performance Conference in New York, July 2003, and subsequently published in Asian Theatre Journal 21.2 (2004): 177 – 186.

23 This play will be referred to as Sandpit. However it should be noted that there is another published play, also by Maniam, which is called The Sandpit: A Monologue. The analysis of Sandpit is based on the published script and on the 1991 Kuala Lumpur production.
although initially appearing to be antagonistic, ultimately open up and expand their spaces by embracing and sharing that "sense of sisterhood."

The play centres on Santha and Sumathi, the two wives of a well-known underworld figure called Dass. It is revealed through their monologues that Dass was born crippled but, through sheer strength of will, forced his legs to work.\(^\text{24}\) He marries Santha according to traditional rituals but, after a few years, brings home his second wife, Sumathi, whom he has apparently rescued from a brothel. When the play opens, Dass has been missing for four days, and we witness the responses of the two women to this situation. Santha stays home, sitting at the foot of Dass's chair and embroidering a sari border. Sumathi goes to the city to search for him, ending up waiting in a seedy, red-light district hotel room. Neither woman finds him, but in the process of waiting and searching they are somehow liberated from their confining spaces and their strong attachment to their husband, finding a more fluid and welcoming space in a new woman-centred relationship. In *Sandpit*, Maniam embodies within the two women the tension between official (essentialised) and personal (hybrid) performativities, and suggests the possibility of moving beyond essentialisation and isolation towards a new, more inclusive space of existence.

Just as Rosnah has to struggle with rigid definitions of her Malayness which pay little heed to her organically hybrid self, so Santha and Sumathi find themselves, as Malaysian-Indian women, defined by restrictive borders. In Malaysia the Indians find themselves economically and socially marginalised and disadvantaged. It should be noted here that this economic and social marginalisation affects mainly the Tamils and (among the Tamils) it is most severe for those connected with plantation labour. Other Indians – Punjabis, Malayalis, Sindhis, and so on – came to Malaya with a reasonably high degree of education, or with a strong family-oriented business network, or with some other advantage or traditional affiliation which allowed them to prosper. In colonial times, however, Tamil labourers were brought to Malaya from India to work in the rubber estates, beginning a cycle of poverty and lack of education which marks the community to this day. More than a hundred years after these labourers were first

\(^{24}\) He dug himself a deep pit, and buried himself in it up to the waist, so that he had to stand upright, the sand supporting him in lieu of his crippled legs. Eventually, the blood flowed into his legs and he was able to walk. Having started from a point of weakness, Dass knows the value of power, and seeks throughout
brought to Malaya, statistics still paint a bleak picture. Santha Oorjitham notes that although they form only seven per cent of Malaysia’s population, Indians “account for 63% of those arrested under the Emergency Ordinance for violent crimes. They also constitute 41% of beggars and 20% of child abusers. Indians rank lowest in national elementary-school examinations.” Ramachandran and Shanmugam, writing in 1995, assert that plantation workers “still earn meager incomes, live in squalid conditions, and suffer from low levels of health care and personal well-being” (395). They are, in other words, trapped within a space of severe social and economic disadvantage. As Suhaini Aznam points out: “Their 51.2% presence on the rubber estates alone means that members of the Indian community are still unable to break away from the stereotypes of rubber tappers and poor coolie labourers” (“Cycle” 17). It is sad, but perhaps not surprising, that these statistics show no improvement from those provided by V. Suryanarayan, writing ten years earlier than Aznam, in 1982 (36 – 37).

To a large extent, this stagnancy can be put down to authoritative indifference as well as to the active collusion of the companies which own the estates. By maintaining the cycle of ignorance, poverty and debt, they ensure that they have what amounts to a captive pool of labour. The government does take some measures to help estate labourers, for example, by setting minimum wages or by pressing for better housing. However, these steps do not substantially help the labourers to move out of the estate and into better-paying employment. There even seems to be a kind of wilful refusal on the part of the authorities to recognise and address the issue of Indian poverty in Malaysia. One Malaysian Indian minister complains about critics: “The workers are poor and so they say the whole community is poor. The critics take a blinkered view, refusing to look left or right but only at the estate workers” (qtd. in Ahmad); while the minister may certainly be right when he points out that there are many successful Indian businessmen, this does not change the basic fact of the miserable lives led by estate workers.

However, more insidious than this institutionalised reinforcement of poverty is the extent to which particular attitudes have been normalised within society, so that the community itself becomes self-regulating, ensuring that the majority of its members
remain within these constrictive but known and familiar boundaries. Preservation of language and culture are frequently held up as reasons for the retention of certain modes of behaviour which reinforce the cycle of poverty and poor education. The community about which Maniam writes is complicit in maintaining an adherence to cultural and linguistic purity, and thus in maintaining levels of poverty, isolation and ignorance.

As noted in the 1931 Census Report of Madras, the Indian emigrant "takes his own world with him and sets it down in his new surroundings" (cited in Arasaratnam 65), thus creating a situation in which he or she lives in a particular world without becoming a part of it. R. Rajoo has noted several factors (such as the disinclination of the British to settle the Indians in Malaya permanently, the geographical proximity of Malaya and India, which allowed for the maintenance of kinship ties, and the pride in claiming part of India’s great cultural heritage) which led to "the retention of not only their Indian identity but also sub-ethnic and caste identities" (59). While this serves as an explanation for the maintenance of strongly sub-continental Indian identities before independence, it is important to note that these identities prevail even today. V. Suryanarayan, speaking of the situation in the late twentieth century, contends that: "The younger generation is slowly getting deculturised and immediate steps should be taken to halt these dangerous trends. The only way by which a cultural renaissance can take place in Malaysia is by strengthening relations with India" (47). This statement is peculiarly at odds with his assumption that "a national culture" will eventually evolve. How, it can be reasonably asked, is a national culture – which Suryanarayan defines as "essentially Malay in character, but with an intermingling enrichment of other cultures" – to develop if each racial group insists on maintaining the particularities of its own culture?

Maniam had addressed precisely this point; tolerance as practised in Malaysia means that "each community remain [sic] within its cultural territory, and try not to transgress into the cultural domains of other communities. This could be an attractive feature of the country [...]. But it also makes for a 'cultural entrapment,' a reluctance to enter into the perspectives offered by other cultures" ("New Diaspora" 6). While these remarks are relevant to Malaysia in a general sense, Maniam has also discussed
the point with specific reference to Malaysian Indians in several of his works.\textsuperscript{25} Holding on to 'pure' Indian cultural traditions hems the community in, so that it is unable to find a place in the arena of economic progress.

The tendency among this group to culturally and linguistically isolate itself from Malaysian society by, for example, insisting on the primacy of education in the Tamil language points to the negative hold tradition can have. As Rajakrishnan and Daniel point out, "Tamil education does not command much economic value in Malaysia" (6), and it cannot help the community break out of its cycle of poverty.\textsuperscript{26} By isolating themselves from the general run of society and from other cultures, that is by zealously maintaining the 'pure' cultural traditions that enclose them within narrow, limiting spaces, they condemn themselves to a disadvantaged and marginal existence. Thus while a majority of the Indians in Malaysia are confined to spaces defined by ignorance and poverty, these spaces are not wholly authority-created.

The situation is generally even more restrictive for women, who are accorded a subordinate position within the Indian social and familial hierarchy, and who have little or no recourse to legal protection: "'marriage seems the only escape, but they later realise that this does not solve the problem,' said [Irene] Fernandez [...]. 'The male thinks he can do as he wishes, whereas the woman is culturally brought up to believe that she must protect her thali [matrimonial chain] until she dies,' she explained" (Aznam, "Women's Burden" 18). Thus within the already constricted space afforded to the majority of Malaysian Indians, women's spaces are even more confined. They are limited by the fact that they have to make their husbands (and later, their sons) the centre of their lives. K. S. Susan Oorjitham points to the entrenchment of certain social rules which demand female dependence: "Manu, the Hindu law-giver formulated certain rules whereby a woman was to depend on her father in childhood, on her husband in her young age and on her sons in her old age" (116). Any space available to them, then, is circumscribed by their subordination to the dominant male figures in

\textsuperscript{25} See, for example, his novel \textit{The Return} (1981), his play \textit{The Cord} (1984), and short story \textit{Haunting the Tiger} (1996).

\textsuperscript{26} While the Chinese community also has vernacular schools, they are far more able to support these schools financially, so that generally Chinese schools are well-equipped, well-staffed and comfortable. Furthermore, students emerge from these schools competent in Mandarin, and are therefore able to find employment with Chinese-run companies, of which there are many. Tamil speakers do not have the same network on which to rely.
their lives. Public spaces are ceded to the men, and such control as women have is limited to the domestic sphere, but even here the habit of granting total dominance to the men has resulted in the domestic and financial subordination of the women.

Maniam sees the disadvantages of holding on to a largely irrelevant tradition to the exclusion of all else; he maintains that embracing, or at least coming into contact with, other cultures would be an enriching experience which would open up a new spaces. In *Sandpit*, he examines the clash between rigidly held tradition and the hybrid reality of life in Malaysia, coming eventually to a kind of resolution between the two.

In Santha and Sumathi, the two wives of Dass, Maniam has embodied two varying attitudes: the desire to hold on to tradition and ritual as a way of ordering and protecting an individual’s life, and the desire to do away with them, as they can be restrictive and even punitive. Santha is the traditional wife who functions by cultural and behavioural codes once common in India. Hers is the constricted, bounded space first constituted by official policy and then normalised and absorbed into daily social practice. She embraces the outdated Indian traditions which officially constitute the culture to which Malaysian Indians are expected to look for cultural grounding. Adherence to these traditions suggests a cultural purity and a fundamental connection with India, which are at odds with the reality of Malaysian life—a reality more evident in Sumathi’s responses. Sumathi, the younger, more modern second wife is brash and outgoing; she inhabits a more hybrid cultural space. She rejects ‘pure’ tradition as being irrelevant to her life in an organically hybrid society where, as Maniam suggests, she occupies “several cultural [...and...] imaginative spaces” (“New Diaspora” 10).

At the end of the play, the two women move away from these oppositional stances, coming together to produce an identity that does not adhere to either extreme. Their coming together is symbolic, as throughout the play they are understood to be physically in different locations. However, despite this, they cross into each other’s physical stage spaces at the end; the audience thus is given a concrete physical and visual demonstration of their spiritual melding. Ewa Ziarek states that: “By opening the possibility of intervention and redescription of sexual norms, reiteration not only stresses the historicity of the law but also opens an ‘incalculable’ future, no longer submitted to its jurisdiction” (129). Maniam’s characters are able to overcome the
jurisdiction of the state in the construction of their spaces; Santha's reiterations stress the historicity of constructed identities, while Sumathi's refusal to reiterate points to the failure of these constructions. It is only by coming together, however, that the two women are able to move beyond into the "incalculable" future.

Both the regulation and disruption of identities are expressed in physical and spatial terms. The individual's racial/cultural identity is lived within authority-imposed borders. While these spaces and borders are what Henri Lefebvre calls "mental" spaces, Maniam portrays them physically, as bounded spaces within buildings and cities. This physicalisation underlines the reality and substance that these 'mental' borders have for the individual.

The space which Santha, Sumathi and Dass would typically occupy as a home is signified by: "The verandah of a wooden house, the type found off Jalan Bangsar or Kampung Baru or Sentul" (Sandpit 183). The three locations mentioned by Maniam would immediately suggest to his Malaysian audience a particular level of poverty, isolation and clinging to tradition. The characters would be largely uneducated, and more confined by adherence to tradition than their middle-class counterparts. Their social space is therefore understood to be limited and limiting. However for the duration of this play, the traditional 'home' is occupied only by Santha, with both Dass and Sumathi having escaped its confines. This communal space is contrasted with the cheaply furnished hotel room "somewhere in Kuala Lumpur" to which Sumathi has gone, in search of Dass.

While Maniam does not provide a specific location (he does not, for instance, state definitely that the house is in Sentul), he nonetheless locates the house and its inhabitants through association. For a Malaysian audience, the simple elements which comprise the set serve to mentally locate the characters as poor and marginal. This specificity is in contrast with Rosnah where, even though we are aware of two specific locations (Singapore and London), we nonetheless retain a sense that Rosnah is floating unanchored. Maniam's characters are inextricably linked to a particular type of locale. However, rather than providing the anchorage that Rosnah lacks, this link serves to entrap the characters within a tiny, marginal and severely disadvantaged space. Certainly this reflects the social position of individuals such as Santha and Sumathi
within Malaysian society. What this play suggests is that the characters in this play are able to escape these limiting spaces by constituting identities which challenge limitation; but to what extent? Maniam addresses these questions through Santha and Sumathi.

Santha lives within the borders prescribed by society, while Sumathi’s occupation of her spaces is more transgressive. Lefebvre speaks of a “distinction between dominated spaces and appropriated spaces” (164). McAuley notes that Lefebvre defines “the former as space transformed and mediated by technology and controlled by the institutions of political power, while the latter is a natural space, modified to serve the needs and possibilities of a particular group in society” (Space 281). It is possible to read Santha and Sumathi as inhabiting these two different spaces. Santha occupies the dominated space in which questions of racial and cultural identity are powerfully mediated by political institutions and social custom. Sumathi seeks a natural space which she can appropriate to serve the needs of her own disruptive identity.

They initially occupy different cultural spaces, and this is reflected in the use of space in the staging of the play. Each woman occupies half the stage – one half is set up as the squatter house, while the other half serves as the cheap hotel room. For the purposes of the plot, Santha and Sumathi are meant to be in two distinct locations, with no possibility that they can communicate with or hear each other. Yet the lack of any physical division on stage (such as a wall or screen) challenges the idea of separation. The questioning of division and separation into discrete spaces begins, therefore, on an almost subconscious visual level. Anne James, who played Santha, notes that Santha and Sumathi “interact on a subliminal, subconscious level [...] We do not see each other, yet we cannot simply shut the other person out” (qtd. in Nge, “Play that Challenges” 218). Physically, neither woman is ‘shut out’ because they are both visible to the audience for the entire length of the play. Furthermore, Maniam maintains a subtle mental connection between the two: in the opening scene, for example, Santha begins by talking about the sari border she is embroidering, while in the very next speech Sumathi scornfully dismisses that same sari border. Maniam states that the two women “are operating on a common wavelength” (qtd. in Nge, “A Playwright”), even
though the gulf between them seems unbridgeable. It is this connection which leads us to think that, as director Krishen Jit puts it, "life together is livable but life apart is not" (Nge, "Play that Challenges" 218). Although he contrasts the attitudes of the two women—the traditionalist Santha and the modern Sumathi—Maniam does not suggest that one attitude is preferable to the other. Instead, we come to realise that it is an amalgam of the two—a life together—which is his ultimate goal. However, it is only towards the end of the play that we come to this realisation. Initially, the impression is of division, disagreement and binary opposition.

Santha reflects the official policy which demands that she look back to India for cultural validation. This also results in her taking on the role of the submissive and obedient wife. When her husband brings Sumathi home for the first time, for example, he demands that Santha welcome her with due ceremony. She does so despite her own feelings, in order to maintain her socially and culturally-imposed identity as a dutiful wife. Her own wedding to Dass was, she states, "done correctly" (that is, according to culture and tradition). And yet, as she bitterly acknowledges: "Now there's nothing to show for the marriage" (Sandpit 185). In submitting to Dass's demands, she repeats the regulatory practices that shape her society, but in this case, the repetition has failed. Janelle Reinelt points out that since "failure is constitutive of the rupture between conditions and effects of the speech act, the resulting destabilization of law allows an opening for resistance and also for transformation in iteration" (204). If successful, the performative act which declares Santha to be Dass's wife should provide her with a defined, safe role and space. Since this is patently not the case—that is, since her space as 'wife' is invaded by another woman—the failure allows Santha the possibility of resistance and transformation. Her bitterness and her expression of the anger she has hitherto suppressed undermine notions of her submissiveness and her subordinate role, demonstrating instead that she understands the socially-imposed rules to be groundless.

Because of her initial adherence to a narrow tradition, Santha inhabits a narrow cultural space, one that partakes only of India, rather than incorporating Malaysia. On stage, this narrowness is represented by the tiny space afforded by the chair and the floorspace immediately around it. It should be noted that this space is not a factor of the size of the stage; rather, Santha seems spiritually anchored to a very small space
defined by Dass’s chair. Socially and culturally ‘chained’ to her husband by the vows implied by her *thali* (a matrimonial chain in more ways than one), Santha demonstrates his culturally-imposed centrality to her life by not moving more than one or two feet away from the chair which symbolises his presence.

The smallness of her world is underlined by her devotion to the sari border which she is embroidering. The tiny movements she makes as she sews, and her relative immobility, seem to physically constrain her. The stage directions state that she is dressed in a sari that is “worn primly and tucked tightly at her waist, its border wide and stiff” (*Sandpit* 183). Again, the description suggests physical imprisonment, lack of freedom and space. The sari – symbolic of Indian tradition – forms tight, narrow boundaries within which she can move little, for fear of disarranging the prim folds and stiff border.

Sumathi seems to present a total contrast to Santha. She is wearing “a fairly fashionable but rumpled dress” (*Sandpit* 184), unlike Santha’s immaculate sari. The costume worn by Charlene Rajendran (who played Sumathi in the Kuala Lumpur performance) consisted of a fairly tight (and therefore fairly revealing) T-shirt and a flowing, patterned skirt. The looseness of the skirt allowed the actress to move vigorously and freely. The costume thus indicates that Sumathi has discarded that aspect of Indian culture which demands physical restraint in women. She has command of wider physical spaces than does Santha.

In this play, Sumathi has left her husband Dass’s house and gone beyond the space allowed her as being culturally appropriate. Where Santha seems to allow the dominated space to govern her movements, Sumathi crosses borders, disrupting regulatory practice, by attempting to appropriate some space for herself within the dominated space. By going to her husband’s seedy work and social milieu, she is performing an identity that goes beyond the one officially allowed her. Her physical movements within this space also speak of less restraint and restriction than with Santha. The stage directions indicate that she walks up and down, while Santha remains very still. In performance, Rajendran was constantly moving, skirt flowing, bangles jangling. Physicality is Sumathi’s hallmark.
She connects Santha with restrictions: “Akka\(^{27}\) is full of ceremonies. Like my family. One for every day of the week. One to choke you, one to tie your feet to the house door, one to tie up your mind” (Sandpit 185). Ritual and tradition serve only to imprison her by tying her to the house in her culturally-constituted role as woman. She escapes her family by running away to town, where Dass eventually liberates her from a life of prostitution by taking her as his second wife. This marriage has also freed her from the restrictions of her family who, like Santha, live by the cultural regulations imposed by state and society. She calls her family home “the house of the dead” (Sandpit 189). And yet, her life with Dass has also created a different set of rules and boundaries, in which she must now define herself in relation to him.

Spiritually we can see Santha’s space as small and restrictive. She is defined by silence and stillness, an unwillingness or inability to kick against the bonds which her devotion to her culture places on her. Dass calls her “the silencer.” Sumathi declares that Santha “[pushed] him […] with her silence […]. He couldn’t breathe in front of her” (Sandpit 189). Her adherence to the old culture is stifling. Dass punishes her by beating her with “The Stinger,” a dried and cured rayfish tail which Sumathi defines as a “set of rules. Rules that have come through time. Rules that have come through people. Rules that beat you down. Rules you use to beat down others” (Sandpit 215). Santha is bounded by these rules, and demands that others too remain bound by them.

However Santha’s stillness, silence and boundedness cannot be seen solely as indications of weakness or restriction. She is not without resources; she knows what her husband does, she knows who the criminal types are who come looking for him, she is able to deal with them. She is not solely the weak, sheltered, dominated wife. She is capable of transgressing her own rules; for example, she breaks out of her culturally imposed space (at her husband’s feet) by sitting in Dass’s chair, something she would not do were he there. But she breaks her rule only to show her contempt for Sumathi, the (to her) shameless, slutish modern woman who does not know her place. She appropriates Sumathi’s behaviour, steps briefly into her space, demonstrates her perception of it as unacceptable, and then rejects it. She sits in the chair confidently, displaying no awe or nervousness that she is trespassing on her husband’s culturally-

\(^{27}\) A Tamil term of respect for an older sister or older woman.
sanctioned space. Again, we see Santha’s potential for performatively constructing a transgressive, disruptive identity.

Sumathi is a vital and physical creature who wants to let her body “live” and “dance,” rebelling against the graveyard silence of her family home (Sandpit 190). When, as a young girl living with her family, she unknowingly transgresses cultural rules of female modesty by letting the wind blow her skirt up around her thighs, she is punished harshly: she is wrapped tightly in a sarong and has cold water poured on her “until I couldn’t breathe [...]. The wet cloth sucked my blood away, sucked my nerves away. You call that living?” (Sandpit 194). The tightly wrapped, suffocating sarung is reminiscent of Santha’s tightly-tied sari: it is a narrow, constrained space within which Sumathi’s family expects her to exist. Her response is purely physical: she takes a bunch of leaves and beats herself “all over the body. The sharp leaves made the blood flow again. The body lived once again” (Sandpit 198). The leaves she uses are *vepalai* or *neem* leaves, which are viewed by many Indians as having immense, almost mystical, curative and restorative powers. Sumathi’s use of them on her body, therefore, suggests healing and restoration rather than punishment in the form of self-flagellation. Sumathi’s physicality is reflected in Dass’s use of “The Firemaker” rather than the Stinger on her body. Sumathi defines it as: “Not just a rattan cane. Something you hold [...]. It’s inside you all the time [...]. Beats you into wakefulness” (Sandpit 215). Sumathi is controlled not by the rules of the Stinger, but the awareness and vitality of the Firemaker.

Sumathi refuses to bow to the traditions and practices held so dear by Santha. Her flouting of tradition is a deliberate rejection of what she sees as pernicious and stifling, namely the past with its increasingly irrelevant traditions: “but you, akka, make the chair too sacred. That’s why I sat there like a slut sometimes. Just to make you angry. Because behaving like that towards the chair you took me back to the past. I didn’t want the past. I don’t want the past” (Sandpit 204). To Sumathi, the past signifies the deadening existence in her family home. By openly defying the past, she undermines it and reduces its power as a regulatory tool. It is interesting that she knows

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28 Maniam often works out characters and ideas for his plays through his short stories. The short story *Mala* provides an insight into the character of Sumathi, and provides a fuller account of the punishment recounted here (*Mala* 222 - 241). In the story, the whole incident is contextualised within the frame of a
her behaviour will earn her the epithet “slut.” Her awareness takes her character to a level of self-definition which is important in this context. She is willing to define herself outside the narrow space of tradition, culture, and value-system to escape a cultural and social structure that has done nothing but punish and stifle her. By behaving like a “slut,” she appropriates her own space of existence.

However, Sumathi’s sense of freedom is undermined by her husband’s violence. She remains in a dominated space when he beats her. She equates the beatings with her own self-flagellation; he beats her, she says, to metaphorically wake her up because she “was becoming lazy” (Sandpit 200). She therefore declares that she does not mind the beatings. But Dass’s abuse indicates that he exerts violent control over both women, subduing them to his will.

Dass is physically absent from the action of the play, but dominates mentally, guiding and influencing the actions of the women. His is a looming presence. As a traditional, domineering Indian male he represents the patriarchy, and can be further read as standing for the patriarchal state. It is he who has contact with the wider world, while his wives are confined to domestic roles. Like Rosnah, they are entrapped within feminised spaces which limit their agency. Each woman is confined to a particular physical space because of her relationship to Dass; this confinement reflects their entrapment within subordinate, submissive roles.

Thus, although Sumathi has left Dass’s house, she is still confined within the hotel room, unable to go anywhere until Arumugam, Dass’s deputy, brings her word. Without Dass’s protection, she is vulnerable. Ah Pek, the hotel owner/pimp comes to the door with offers to bring her customers. To remain safe, she must stay barricaded behind the door. She, like Santha, is trapped within her space, even if it is a wider space than Santha’s. If Santha is trapped by her adherence to a pure culture which no longer exists, Sumathi is hampered by a lack of tradition. Moving out of the regulated space has freed her to some extent, but it has also left her vulnerable: where Santha is relatively ‘safe’ because she maintains the role of the traditional wife who keeps to her ‘place,’ Sumathi has given up the protection afforded by adherence to traditional roles. If she cannot be defined as the traditional wife, then she is free to be redefined by all young girl’s growing sexuality.
who interact with her. Thus by taking a disruptive stance towards the culture by which she is officially defined, she undermines whatever security it provides.

Neither woman on her own is able to find an accommodating new space. Each is in some way hampered, for example by her dependence on Dass. Despite this sense of entrapment, however, Maniam ends the play on a more positive note. Where in *Rosnah* the various female voices dwindle from confusion and hysteria into silence, in *Sandpit* the two voices blend to create a new voice. Santha declares her willingness to "make another beginning, start a new border" (*Sandpit* 216); she is eager now to explore different spaces, but she is not willing to discard borders altogether. What she builds now will have the 'old' border as its basis. Her final speech is filled with a sense of her growing strength. She addresses the chair that symbolises her husband, demanding: "Why do you try to catch the flashes in the sky? Why don't you be the sky, rising above everything, silent, watching, waiting?" (*Sandpit* 216). By contrasting his reaching after the "flashes" with her own ability to rise above everything through her silence, her waiting and watching, she asserts her superiority. Sumathi sees her as passive, but Santha now shows her patience to be born out of anger rather than passivity: "My patience will be the anger I haven't used since I married you" (*Sandpit* 216); she will use this anger to fuel her search for a new beginning. Santha resolves to be "both man and woman;" interestingly, this resolution is sparked by her cutting observation that Sumathi is "like a man" (*Sandpit* 216), perhaps in her boldness in striking out beyond prescribed borders of femininity. If "that woman" can be like a man, she says, then it will certainly not be beyond her; the phrasing here not only scornfully dismisses Sumathi, it also suggests that being a man is no very difficult task. Furthermore, the decision to be both man and woman suggests that Dass has not been able to adequately take on the role of man, leaving Santha to take over. Although his presence is invoked by the chair, the ease with which Santha earlier took his place in it literally and figuratively displaces, and potentially replaces, him. Santha's refusal to sit in the chair grows not out of fear of Dass, but out of a respect for (patriarchally-defined) tradition.

Sumathi also steps beyond the borders of her world, which is defined by her relationship with Dass. She has to some extent idealised the seamy underworld
inhabited by Dass, seeing it in terms of the glamour of bars and nightclubs, and the
"expensive leather handbag" she owns (Sandpit 184). While she has Dass’s protection, it is indeed a relatively glamorous and luxurious life; but in order to continue enjoying that aspect of Dass’s world, she has to remain subordinate to and defined by him. In her final speech she shows awareness of how rough, messy and corrupt this world is (Sandpit 215), but she resolves not to shield herself from this roughness. She is “going to step out into the sand. Search the back lanes. Search out athan” (Sandpit 215).29 Significantly, she invites Santha to step out of her confined space and join her. By suggesting that they both “step out into the sand” she hints at the possibility of establishing common ground between them. By doing so they will together form a new space, one which incorporates both Santha’s traditionalism and Sumathi’s iconoclasm. Maniam claims that a “common culture has not yet been evolved” (“New Diaspora” 6); what we see in the tentative sharings between Santha and Sumathi is the beginning of that evolution.

At the end of the play, the two women break into a dance. The invisible barriers on stage are broken as Sumathi steps into Santha’s space, and Santha abandons stillness in favour of controlled physical movement, although both women are still invisible to each other. In this scene we see the possibilities of Krishen Jit’s suggestion that “life together is livable, but life apart is not” (Nge, “Play that Challenges” 218). The two women transgress each other’s spaces, suggesting some kind of coming together, some melding of Santha’s adherence to cultural purity and Sumathi’s rejection of it. In performing this dance, the two women are also performing a new, different space which reshapes and reconfigures the spaces they have so far inhabited.

An interesting point to consider is the way in which the two women affect or influence each other physically in this last scene. Sumathi sings “don’t be swayed by uncertainty, / don’t be swayed by the unholy” (Sandpit 216), which suggests that she has begun to take on some of Santha’s steadiness and gravity. Santha, meanwhile, rises to dance “in her own controlled and yet in a vital fashion” (Sandpit 216). She appears to have absorbed some of Sumathi’s physical energy, although it is tempered by her own physical and mental control. Maniam asserts that when Santha “enters the

29 Athan is an honorific used by Tamil Hindu women to refer to their husbands.
personality of Sumathi, she discovers she can be, like her sister in marriage, sensual as well" ("Preface" xiv). Thus despite the apparent distance between the two women, each one's personality informs the character of the other one so that they are joined, existing within each other, in a way that Rosnah found she could not achieve despite encouragement from Nenek, Siti Zubaidah and the Actress.

Krishen Jit, who directed the productions of this play in both Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, changed the presentational spaces with which he had to work, to underscore the resonances of Maniam's play. The Kuala Lumpur production was staged at the British Council Hall in Bukit Aman, a small rectangular space which had a raised stage and two-tiered seating typical of a school hall. Jit rearranged the space so that the playing area was along one of the long walls; this playing area was surrounded on three sides by audience seating, with some people sitting on the floor. The Singapore production also played with seating, confounding audiences, as they walked in. According to Hannah Pandian, audience members walking into Singapore's Black Box Theatre were taken aback because: "Not only was the air resonant with old Tamil cinema songs, but half the seats had been replaced by straw mats on the floor" ("Cripple"). A Singaporean audience walking into an experimental theatre space would not expect to be confronted with these rather nostalgic visual and aural images; by thus confronting them, the director is able to disarm them, leaving them vulnerable as they step into what is, effectively, an alien environment – the under-represented space of the marginalised Malaysian Indian. The use of the Tamil cinema songs is particularly interesting. In Malaysia and Singapore, the Tamil language is often treated (by non-Tamils, or more generally by non-Indians) as being somewhat comic, largely because the rich and rolling syllables are rarely heard and are therefore unfamiliar.

Furthermore, the songs are connected with the Tamil films that are shown several times a week on television, and which are commonly seen as being melodramatic and

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30 The British Council Kuala Lumpur has since moved to larger premises in Jalan Tun Razak.
31 I recall being in a supermarket in Kuala Lumpur, when an announcement of some kind was made over the public address system. Shoppers listened, unmoved, as the announcement was made in Malay, Chinese and English. When it was repeated in Tamil, there were surprised titters throughout the supermarket. This reaction would have been sparked at least in part by the fact that public announcements in Malaysia are usually made in Malay, and occasionally English and Chinese. Tamil, in this context, seemed alien and inappropriate – a disturbing thought, given that it is the official language of one of Malaysia's main races.
Playing these songs as a prelude to the staging of Sandpit is a defiant gesture, daring the audience to laugh, forcing them to rethink their instinctive reactions.

Thus the director was able to disrupt expectations as soon as the audience walked in; and by bringing them into much closer proximity with the actors, he was able to diminish the distance a middle-class audience might feel when confronting this tale of working-class people. Having to sit on the floor, a common practice in a household such as Santha’s, would also serve to forge a link between them, forcing the audience to accommodate themselves physically to the arrangements within Santha’s home. Just as Tan and Sharma privilege the Malay language in certain parts of Rosnah, so Krishen Jit foregrounds Malaysian Tamil working-class culture and space, giving it a prominence rare in middle-class Malaysia and Singapore.

In the end, Maniam seems to be leading us towards an intentionally hybrid identity: he knowingly melds the ‘pure’ tradition endorsed by the state with the organically hybrid, emergent tradition that is the everyday reality. A different intention and agency challenge the hegemonic, dominant intention. Santha and Sumathi challenge the myriad constraints on their space. They transgress the borders placed around them and find what Bhabha calls an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybrid that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Location 4). But it remains only a possibility. Although the performance of this play suggests the potential for constituting new identities, it speaks only to a small audience. The majority of the space is still dominated rather than appropriated. Santha and Sumathi have been dominated by a society which seeks to define them within narrow and rigid boundaries. Their final coming together breaks down these barriers. But even though Maniam points the way, it is still a tentative movement at best, as the two women connect in the realm of the imagination only.

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32 Although it is generally only Tamils who watch these films in their entirety, some of the common tropes used have become more widely familiar, in distorted form, through stereotyped, mocking repetitions which turn often tragic or tender scenes into comic scenarios.
Conclusion

Maniam states that in many of his stories he has written about "how mindless people can become when they get into the clutches of one culture and that culture limits the person's existence, limits the person's imagination and feelings;" he counters this monomania with a call for "a combining of the two worlds" (Maniam, "Interview" 18). This combination begins to be seen in Sandpit. An examination of the spaces inhabited by the two female characters shows that they finally enjoy a celebratory redefining of their borders to include both worlds.

The resolution of Rosnah remains more ambiguous and uncertain, because state intervention in individual lives seems so intense and omnipresent in Singapore. Rosnah keeps referring back to the state in her speeches. For example, she speaks of institutions such as Mendaki and her duty to join the group on her return from London; she queries why so few Malay boys do their 'A' levels and go to university (Rosnah 176). Her rhetoric sounds learnt, as if she is parroting public statements about the position of the Malays. 'Her' opinions are inscribed on her by the state. Ultimately the play tends towards the view that the inability, in Singapore, to escape the scrutiny and influence of the state speaks of continuing confinement within narrow and strictly regulated personal spaces.

State influence seems less oppressive, or at least less omnipresent, in Maniam's play, leaving the two women with some agency. However the smallness of the world Maniam has created (it is inhabited almost exclusively by working-class Malaysian Tamils) does to some extent undermine the positive aspects of his message. The play seems to suggest that the crossing of borders can (at least for the moment) occur only within authoritatively-constituted racial and cultural borders. While Maniam urges Malaysians to "come out from [their own cultures...] and reach out to the world" ("New Diaspora" 2), he himself can only portray what he knows: his own, narrow cultural and racial world, the space to which authority has consigned him.

33 Mendaki means 'to climb' in Malay. It is also the name of an organization which is meant to help Singaporean Malays improve their lot
However, the creation and production of the two plays suggests the power of the theatre itself to redefine authoritative borders, bringing specific, mono-racial experiences into a wider, more multi-racial context.

The discussion in this chapter has focused almost exclusively on race and culture. Gender, however, also plays a significant part in defining individual spaces. Both Malaysia and Singapore are intolerant of identities which in any way violate the borders of ascribed gender identity. In this chapter, the characters discussed do not step far beyond their mandated ‘female’ spaces. Rather, there is more focus on the restrictions they face as women existing in largely male, dominated spaces. In the next chapter, the focus is on attempts to violate and expand imposed gender and sexual identities, both male and female.

In the two plays studied in this chapter, the female characters are dominated by the patriarchy in the form of the state. There is, despite the physical absence of men, a looming male presence in their lives. In the next chapter the plays analysed are characterised by a greater absence of men and even of the patriarchal presence. Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations* presents the feminised male body. The men in Leow Puay Tin’s *Family* are largely absent; the patriarchal influence is, interestingly, most visible in the way in which the women react to and treat each other.
Chapter Four

Re-shaping Male and Female Bodies: Mergers and Accusations and Family

I define myself socially as an educated, middle-class woman, reasonably independent in the way I live my life despite the fact that I am married and have young children. My family had not conditioned me to accept a subordinate position as a female, being far more concerned with educating me and preparing me to look after myself. Most of my closest friends are in the same position and I had assumed, naively, that this social positioning was common. I was, therefore, rather shocked when a friend relayed to me the information that she had been asked whether my husband gave me permission to become involved in the local theatre scene. It had not at any time occurred to me that I needed or was expected to ask his permission, as we treat each other as independent beings quite capable of making our own decisions. Clearly, this view was not as common as I had thought. Thinking further about the matter, it began to dawn on me that the ethnic/religious group to which I belong, while it encourages education and employment for women, also to a large extent expects that they retain the traditionally subservient role.

Such thinking is common across the spectrum in Malaysia and Singapore. Many women are in full-time paid employment, but this is often out of economic necessity rather than from any intrinsic recognition of the woman’s desires or ability. Although household chores are often taken care of by foreign domestic help, care of children is still largely regarded as the responsibility of the mother, as the home is her ‘proper sphere.’ Men are constructed as having the intellect and ability to deal with the public world, while women are posited as feminised, domestic creatures who are necessarily subordinate to the patriarchal figures in their lives – husbands, fathers and even sons. While they reflect the male/public-female/private dichotomy on which the nation is typically based (see chapter one, p. 71 and chapter three, p.160), these constructions are

1 Common acceptance of this viewpoint in society is visible in the use of such colloquial terms as ‘queen control,’ which indicates a man who is controlled by an overbearing, imperious wife. The term suggests that such women are high-handed and above their ‘normal station.’ It also paints the husband as a pathetic, laughable character, someone to be mocked because he is not in control. School textbooks have contributed to the entrenchment of stereotyped views of gender distinction by commonly picturing the father reading the newspaper while the mother toils in the kitchen.
also based on values propounded in interpretations of the three main cultures and religions on which racial identities in Malaysia and Singapore are based, namely Malay/Islam, Indian/Hindu, and Chinese/Confucian. Both state and society work towards the inscription of a subordinate, domestic, reproductive identity on women. Men are posited as creatures of the mind, able to deal with the world at large. Setting these socially-constructed gender identities within a frame of religious and cultural values which are posited as timeless and primordial, gives these constructs the appearance of normalcy and legitimacy.

This chapter will look at state and social construction of men’s and women’s bodies in Malaysia and Singapore, focusing on how monolithic and essentialising hegemonic constructs of the body are countered and reconsidered in the theatre. In the previous chapter, the focus was primarily on the position of the female within a male-defined and dominated state which was felt as a strong, looming presence. The situations in which the female characters found themselves were set within a cultural framework; they were viewed primarily as bearers of culture negotiating with the relevance of that culture to their lives. The current chapter focuses not on culture but on individual negotiations with state constructions of gender identities, in corporeal rather than cultural terms. The plays go further in removing the patriarchal male presence, to deal with more complex notions of male and female gender, sexuality and embodiment. While these ideas were touched on in chapter three, they will receive fuller treatment in chapter four, and will be read in different ways.

The plays under consideration are Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations* and Leow Puay Tin’s *Family*. Both playwrights are women, as are their protagonists. Through their characters, the writers question constructs of masculinity and femininity, and present alternative sexualities and family structures which do not submit to the frameworks which demand that males be dominant while females are reduced to their domestic and reproductive functions.

Wong found acclaim as well as controversy with the 1993 staging of *Mergers and Accusations* by TheatreWorks, directed by Rani Moorthy and Ong Keng Sen. The play was then staged in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, by Five Arts Centre (FAC), with Anne James directing. In 2003, *Mergers* was staged in Singapore by Wild Rice, along with
two other plays centred on protagonist Ellen Toh, as a trilogy called *Invitation to Treat*. Claire Wong directed the trilogy. Leow’s play was written following a request from Ong Keng Sen in 1994, to write a play “contemporising the classic of the Yang women warriors to explore the role of women in Singapore” (Leow, “Playwright’s Note” 164). Originally entitled *The Yang Family*, the play is now called *Family*. It has been staged in both Malaysia (by FAC, co-directed by Krishen Jit and Wong Hoy Cheong, in 1998) and Singapore (TheatreWorks, directed by Ong Keng Sen, 1996). Both productions were staged in unusual venues; the site in Singapore was an old shophouse, while the Kuala Lumpur production used a crumbling pre-World War Two mansion.

Although state constructions of gender, sexual and corporeal identities form the background to these plays, they are negotiated on a more private level, with a smaller, more inward focus on the family. However, this smaller focus cannot ignore the strong influence of the state even on the most private matters. In Malaysia and Singapore, the state functions as the ultimate father figure, inscribing and enforcing the patriarchal framework at the level of personal relationships, so that the family (consisting, in this structure, of husband, wife and children) functions metonymically, representing the nation; the husband/father stands as the head of the household, to whom all the others (especially the women) are subject. Thus subservience to and respect for the patriarchal structure are ingrained.

Because of this, personal matters such as child-bearing become areas in which the state can (and generally does) intervene; we see the leaders of Malaysia pushing individuals to have up to five children, so that a particular target population rate can be reached; the leadership of Singapore, which in the 1970s implemented strict family planning laws, now seeks to promote a eugenically-based program of encouraging the well-educated to be fruitful and multiply, while discouraging the less well-educated.

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2 The other two plays are called Wills and Secessions and Jointly and Severally.
3 The Yang Women Warriors legend is based on the story of the Yang family of China, during the Song Dynasty. All the men in the family were killed in the line of military duty; eventually all the women in the family took the men's places on the battlefield, and saved the country from invasion.
4 A shophouse was a common feature of the architecture of Malaysia and Singapore; it is usually a double or triple-story building, with a business being run out of the ground floor. In earlier times, the family who ran the business lived on the upper floors. While still common in parts of Kuala Lumpur and in smaller towns in Malaysia, the shophouse is becoming increasingly rare in Singapore.
Race, initially closely linked to the patriarchal country of origin and the phenotype associated with it, has become a matter of authoritative pronouncement; mixed-race offspring who might very closely resemble their (for example) Chinese mothers, are nonetheless labelled 'Indian' or 'Malay' depending on their father's officially-designated race. The state presumes a high level of authority in labelling individuals, whether according to gender or race, implying a kind of ownership – and thus, control – of their bodies.

The use made of the body is especially significant in the context of reconstituting identities through theatre, as actually physically doing a constituted identity serves to reiterate it in an inarguably concrete way. However, it also means that the inescapable physical presence of the body provides a space for the re-constitution and re-construction of the authoritatively-produced corporeal identity. An identity, once embodied, ceases to be either abstract or invisible. To physicalise an identity that is at odds with what is 'acceptable' is to render it real and visible, thus challenging state rhetoric which seeks to dematerialise the (alternative) material body.

The Body as a Site of Physical Inscription

The body is a surface which can be inscribed; it can also, importantly, create its own inscriptions. Despite authoritative attempts to paint the body as a passive, receptive surface, individuals demonstrate that their bodies can challenge and disrupt such assumptions.

Susan Bordo has argued that the body "is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (90). The body is constructed in ways which reinforce the central tenets of a state or society. Foucault articulates a similar point in terms of the exertion of discipline which "defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes [...]. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (qtd. in Bartky 130). Foucault's concept of the construction of bodies through manipulation, coercion, and
power leads us to the idea that male-female difference as generally understood in society "does not have to do with biological 'facts' so much as with the manner in which culture marks bodies and creates specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves" (Gatens 230 – 231). The construction of 'male' and 'female' bodies by patriarchal societies is a performative act aimed not only at reiterating male superiority, but also at subduing and marginalising expressions of gender and sexual difference. For to express a different gender or sexual identity would be to upset the male/female, superior/inferior dyad. This dyad can work only if it is acknowledged that there are only two genders, that heterosexuality is the only option, and that anything 'other' is simply deviant.

The construction and continued existence of patriarchal society depends on the defining of gender and sexual identities in terms of binaries, that is, the unruly female body as against the contained and reasonable male mind. As Elizabeth Grosz argues: "Patriarchal oppression [...] justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms" (Volatile 14). Historical precedent sets the female body as "curiously and uniquely unreliable, most evidently in the female reproductive processes [...] which mark] the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason" (Shildrick and Price 3). This reinforces the long-held ideal that man/reason should dominate the woman/body: "For Plato, it was evident that reason should rule over the body and over the irrational or appetitive functions of the soul" (Grosz, Volatile 5). This devaluation of the woman/body is also evident in the reactions of some Asian cultures to female bodily functions; menstruation, for example, rather than being seen as a necessary biological process without which reproduction could not occur, is viewed as a time of 'uncleanness,' when the woman must be shut off from contact with anything that might be sullied by her impurity. The body, with its capacity to disrupt "the pursuit of truth and knowledge" (Shildrick and Price 2), must clearly be disciplined and controlled. To extrapolate further, any body which does not submit to these binary oppositions is dangerous, stepping over boundaries and threatening to disrupt authoritative categories.
Most feminist discourse on the body points out that the male body is regarded as neutral, the norm from which the female body and the homosexual body have deviated. This 'normative' body is, however, also constructed: as heterosexual, not subject to the mess and unruliness of the female body, and governed by reason and intellect. For men, whether hetero- or homosexual, this constituted identity can be as false and stifling as the female construct can be for women. The problem lies with binary constructions that do not allow for or accept identities that cross boundaries.

Binary constructions can be, and often are, challenged by the understanding that the body as it is commonly conceived – as either male or female, as being able to reproduce or not – need not be binding on the individual. Personal experiences of corporeality, although deviating from the accepted norm, need not be thought of as deviant, as such. Feminist thinking, for example, questions the idea that there can be any such thing as 'a body,' male or female, conceived of monolithically; it moves towards a vision of “a fluid and open embodiment. At any given moment we are always marked corporeally in specific ways, but not as an unchanging or unchangeable fixture” (Shildrick and Price 8). However, such fluidity of interpretation would undermine the rigid male/female dichotomy which underpins patriarchal control. Individual marking and interpretation of a body – for example in terms of sexual identification, or in terms of such matters as dress, bodily ornamentation, or the physical uses to which a body is put – can upset the external constitution, control and definition of bodies.5

Whether in the private domain of the family or the public domain of the state, the structure of patriarchy aims to control and discipline. Grosz points out the potential of physical bodies to disrupt and escape this discipline, noting “the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control” (Volatile xi). This recognition, that it is impossible to set unchangeable, uncrossable boundaries around a body, moves away from the perception of constructed female bodies as being merely passive and dominated. Feminist thought has moved towards a more empowered view; instead of bemoaning the relatively powerless position of women within a patriarchal society (with that lack of power
springing from the construction of the female body as faulty and deviant), postmodern feminist thought “seeks to emphasise the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a differential and fluid construct, the site of potential, rather than as a fixed given” (Shildrick and Price 3).

This view also applies to the construction of the male body; recognition that embodiment is an external force, which is therefore subject to change, modification, and interference, gives men the space to alter inscriptive embodiment. Such a view is not only potentially empowering, it is also explosively dangerous, because it entails “the recognition that if the body itself is not a determinate given, then the political and social structures that take it as such are equally open to transformation” (Shildrick and Price 7–8). As Butler puts it: “The law not only might be refused but might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation” (“Gender is Burning” 382). Thus the body, through which authority seeks to exert control over the individual, also functions as a site of challenge and re-inscription.

Construction of the Body in Malaysia and Singapore

In discussing twentieth-century theorising about the body, Grosz notes two main approaches, the “inscriptive” and the “lived body,” stating that: “The first conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed; the second refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body’s internal or psychic inscription” (Space 33). In Malaysia and Singapore, the state regards the body as a surface on which various laws and values can be inscribed. Thus it is the state which ultimately decides on expressions of race and gender, refusing to legitimise gay identities, for example, or deeming them deviant, or not acknowledging border-crossing racial identities. Increasingly, however, this view is countered by individuals who seek to foreground their own lived experiences, which are frequently at odds with authoritative inscription.

I will look at how Eleanor Wong and Leow Puay Tin examine and resist authoritative embodiment by focusing on the reality of lived experience. The plays to

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5 Female bodybuilders, for example, can attract responses such as distaste and unease because they have
be studied in this chapter represent an expression of the lived body which negotiates with and disrupts the inscriptive, authoritative construction of male and female identities by exploring alternative sexualities, by questioning patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity, and by undermining the use of concepts such as Confucianism to underpin society. Grosz points out that: "If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices" (Space 35 – 36). The bodies presented in these plays are already inscribed by the state, but try simultaneously to make their own counter-inscriptions. At the same time, however, there is a high degree of interpellation within the rules of the authorities and society.

The governments of both Malaysia and Singapore exploit ancient traditions as well as religious values in order to construct individuals in particular ways which will assist in nation-building strategies. These gender roles are performative constructs created in fairly recent times (post-independence), for a specific agenda (nation-building) but, by positioning these constructs as part of a continuum of primordial tradition, the authorities in both countries attempt to disguise their constructedness, suggesting instead that they are an ancient, natural and inherent part of each racial group's culture. Therein lies the potential failure of these authoritative constructs: as Butler points out, the fact that "this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" ("Bodies" 236). Malaysians and Singaporeans do not, at the individual level, lead such rigidly constructed lives.

The disciplining of male and female bodies and identities takes place within the parameters of culture, religion and traditional values as mandated by the authorities. Thus they refer back to Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism and Christianity in their construction of women as homemakers and mothers who must remain subordinate to the men in their lives. K. S. Susan Oorjitham, comparing "the position and attitudes of the Tamil working class women in modern urban Malaysia with the traditional framework," notes very little change (124), while Chia Oai Peng asserts that social

 reshaped their bodies to a point where they no longer look the way a female body is 'supposed' to look.
progress for Chinese women is held back by reliance on limiting, demeaning Confucianist principles which perceive women as belonging purely in the domestic sphere (182).

Rafiah Salim suggests that despite differences in race and religion, "Malaysian women of all origins share a common background," her point can also be extended to apply to Singaporean women:

A wife is always inferior to the husband. The birth of a son is always more joyous than the birth of a daughter. In fact a girl used to survive under the shadow of her brother, then grow up to be dominated by her husband, and would spend her old age with her son. A woman's life revolves around the men in her life. Such was, and still is to a great extent, Malaysian society. (187)

Salim's argument points to the continued enforcement of the unequal male-female power relationship, a construction which places the male body in a position of dominance over the female body. Because this view has been normalised, it blocks the expression or development of relationships and embodiments which do not conform to the male/female binary.

Resistance to non-conformity is evident in authoritative responses. For example, Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan note the prevalence of the patriarchal, controlling view in Singapore: responding to Lee Kuan Yew's exhortation to well-educated women to marry well-educated men and have more children, some women suggested with irony that since they wanted children without the added encumbrance of a husband, the government should support matriarchal families: "Recognizing the threat to patriarchal authority vested in the traditional Asian family – after which its own hierarchies and values were after all patterned – the government conspicuously failed to generate enthusiasm for this alternative" (349 – 350). Clearly, a family structure not centred on the father figure is unacceptable. The underlying agenda here is not only control over individual bodies in the service of the state, but also continuation of and implicit support for the authoritative patriarchal structure which functions as the basis for state rule in both Malaysia and Singapore, conditioning individuals into the habit of unquestioning obedience.
Wong and Leow undermine these representations by presenting complex pictures of men and women who encompass aspects of both masculinity and femininity, thus unsettling ideas of a clear dichotomy between men’s and women’s identities. Wong questions notions of compulsory, ‘natural’ heterosexuality, while Leow challenges Confucian concepts of male and female roles and standing within the social structure.

**Disrupting Gender and Sexual Identities in Singapore: Mergers And Accusations**

Critics have generally responded to *Mergers* as a play focused on the issue of lesbianism in Singapore. In her discussion of *Mergers* and *Wills and Secessions*, Lo refers to Wong as “the first playwright to focus on lesbian sexuality” ("Prison-house" 99). Peterson refers to “the mature and confident handling of the lesbian identity of the play’s central character” in both *Mergers* and *Wills* (*Theater* 151). Most of the reviews and previews refer to lesbianism as the central theme. However, I will approach the play from a more inclusive angle, viewing it not just as a critique of how lesbianism is treated and responded to in Singapore, but more importantly as an interrogation of official constructions, through specific forms of embodiment, of both male and female gender and sexual identities.

In a review of the Wild Rice staging of Wong’s trilogy, the title of the trilogy (*Invitation to Treat*) is explained as “a legal term. Says Eleanor: ‘It means, 'I’m here, make me an offer, and we’ll see if we can come to an agreement’. All three plays are about the gay community initiating a discussion with society.’” (Chow, “Hits”). Wong’s explanation of the legal term implies a high level of availability and openness, which contrasts strongly with the closeted lives still led by the majority of gay men and women in Singapore. It is the reluctance of the rest of society to accept, or “come to an agreement” with, gay identities which results in the continuing necessity to hide. By stressing that it is about the gay community “initiating” a discussion with Singapore society, Chow’s comment involves mainstream society in a dialogue about non-mainstream gender and sexual identities.

In *Mergers* Ellen Toh, Jonathan Chin (Jon) and Mary Okada are colleagues in a law firm, high-flying corporate lawyers all. Mary is married and has one child. Ellen
and Jon are both single, and Ellen makes it clear to Jon that she is a lesbian, although she has not come out to the rest of her colleagues, apart from Mary. Nonetheless, she and Jon embark on an affair, and eventually enter into a marriage of convenience; Ellen has a child, then continues to work, while Jon gives up his career to become a stay-at-home father. Their relationship is ‘open,’ in that Ellen can have affairs with whomever she wants, as long as she comes home each night to her husband and daughter. Things change when Lesley Ryan, “the lesbian lawyer from London” (*Mergers* 37), appears; she and Ellen fall in love. The relationship with Jon disintegrates, but we are left uncertain if there will be a lasting relationship between Lesley and Ellen.

Wong has begun, in this play, to question the constituted gender identities officially available to individuals in Singapore. By marrying Jon and producing a child, Ellen conforms to the ideal, but the reality of their lives together serves to severely undermine the idea that only heterosexual relationships are ‘correct.’ Further, Wong’s approach to the characterisation of Ellen, Jon and Lesley complicates the official attitude to homosexuality as deviant and unnatural; she refuses black-and-white categorisations, highlighting instead the subtleties and confusions involved.

Since the 1993 staging of *Mergers* (although not as a result of it), there has been a slight loosening of attitudes in Singapore towards male homosexuality. Russell Heng suggests that “homosexuals in Singapore have, within a generation of 30 years, progressed from the stage of just having a gay scene which served their entertainment needs to one where there was a nascent sense of community” (90). Lim Kean Fan notes that “censorship of homosexual themes in artistic performances, whilst remaining strict, has also been loosened in the past decade,” and cites then-Prime Minister Goh’s cautious but, for Singapore, groundbreaking acknowledgement in 2003 “that homosexuals are not sick, but just different” (1760). Lo notes that in *Mergers*, “there is no sense of a local lesbian community” (“Prison-house” 102); but by the time Wong wrote *Jointly*, the sense of community had expanded. Where in the first two plays Lesley and Ellen are the only gay characters, the final play includes several more gay women and, notably, “Ellen’s flamboyantly homosexual colleague Mark [...] gleefully dubs himself the ‘fairy godmother’ of the workplace” (Chow, “Brave”).
It is possible to look at this more open attitude in the context of the government’s introduction of ‘Singapore 21,’ new tenets which aim to make Singapore a more fulfilling place in which to live. Singapore 21, launched in 1997, is meant “to strengthen the ‘heartware’ of Singapore in the 21st century – the intangibles of society like social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of Singaporeans” (www.singapore21.org.sg/introduction.html). This, combined with a call to Singaporeans to be more open-minded, points to a greater inclusiveness and acceptance of non-normative identities.

There also seems to be a generational difference in attitudes here, with greater levels of acceptance in society pointing to an increasing independence from government-sponsored ideologies, as noted by director Claire Wong: “‘The first generation would say: ‘Tell us what to do’. The second would say: ‘Come on, let’s negotiate’. And the third is the demanding, globalised and Internet-savvy generation.’” (Chow, “Hits”). Wong’s characterisation of the third generation as “globalised” suggests that it functions beyond the borders put in place by the state, and that it is thus able to find affirmation of marginalised identities in sites which are not regulated by the authorities in Singapore. The ‘softening’ of the authoritative attitude towards the portrayal of gays thus might be a response to globalisation and the increasing porosity of borders which allows individuals to refuse or question state discipline of the body.

However, this does not mean that state surveillance and discipline are out of the picture. A gay Singaporean man interviewed by Lim Kean Fan refers to the subtleties involved in the government’s apparent loosening of control over public spaces such as gay bars, suggesting that: “It would probably be more problematic controlling the gay community if homosexuals are allowed to express their sexuality on the open streets” (1772). While the increase in the number of public gay spaces and the official tolerance of them relieves gays of the need to search for private, hidden spaces, it also allows the state a high level of control because it knows where these public spaces are and can therefore monitor them.

Thus in spite of the apparent opening up of the official attitude towards homosexuality, it remains an identity under constant surveillance. Heng argues that although “at one level, these gains [in the improvement of status of gays] have seemed
impressive, at another, they remain precarious, determined to a large extent by how much the authority is prepared to suffer it" (90). Lim Kean Fan underlines the centrality of authoritative 'sufferance' to the expression of gay identities: "while the government launched the Singapore 21 initiative in 1997 to stimulate active and polyvocal citizenry [...] homosexuals were and still are not allowed to form societies or hold public forums" (1760).

State hegemony over the expression of sexual identities, then, would seem to undermine the Singapore 21 principle that "Every Singaporean Matters." Certainly it does not encourage 'vocality' from the gay community. This apparent contradiction becomes clearer when we look at the third principle of Singapore 21, which asserts the importance of families ("Strong Families: Our Foundation and Our Future"); on the website, the text explicating this particular tenet assumes a basic, normative family structure of two heterosexual parents and their offspring. A photograph accompanying the text on the website shows the ideal extended family: parents, children, grandparent. Thus despite an appearance of greater openness, state rhetoric continues to performatively enforce closed and bounded ideas of gender and sexual identities.

The construction of gendered bodies in Singapore to some extent springs from the adoption of Confucian principles, which involve strict divisions between men and women in terms of perceptions of their abilities and assignment of roles. The Singapore state at one point sought to inculcate 'Confucian values' in its largely Chinese population. Although the project was eventually renamed and reformulated; some level of indoctrination is bound to have taken place, so that some of the more basic principles are likely to have become accepted in society. Confucianism traditionally devalues women's abilities and contributions, confining them to the domestic sphere, while centralising the role and importance of men in the public and private spheres. For example, in a book on the relevance of Confucianism to modern (especially Singaporean) society, Martin Lu refers to the "ideal of a Confucian gentleman" (106); nowhere in the book is there a reference to the ideal Confucian woman – she has been rendered invisible. In Singapore, however, this attitude is mingled with economic considerations and the need for a large workforce. Women in Singapore, therefore, are
embodied both as workers, contributing to the economy, and as managers of domesticity.

Stella Quah notes that in Singapore, “women have been facing for a long time two contradictory social pressures: to be good wives and mothers [...] and to contribute to the economic growth of the country” (Family in Singapore 62). While Quah acknowledges the existence of these “contradictory” pressures on Singapore women, she asserts that “women are increasingly determined to handle both duties – home and job – concurrently” (Family in Singapore 63). She thus presents it as the woman’s choice, without acknowledging the role played by the state in ‘encouraging’ mothers to get back into the workforce, for example by making childcare and domestic help reasonably affordable. Women who “leave their jobs or do not join the labour force at all due to ‘childcare and household commitments’” are labelled “economically inactive” (Quah, Family in Singapore 159 – 160), a term which devalues the work they accomplish at home, in the domestic sphere, as well as ignoring the support provided for men in the public and economic domain by women who maintain the domestic domain. They are not perceived as fully participating in national development unless they are working outside the home. At the same time, however, they must continue to manage their domestic duties: Quah quotes a female government leader who states that “in today’s age women can complete their work more quickly and have more time in [sic] their hands [...] to pursue careers and contribute to the economy” (Family in Singapore 191). Although they participate in the public sphere, it is still not considered their proper or natural place. Their independent, economically active side is to be subjugated to their domestic side. Women are thus primarily embodied as domestic and maternal.

State rhetoric exerts different pressures on men. For example, when Goh Chok Tong lamented the reluctance of educated “girls” to have children, he merely wondered briefly “whether the boys must also share the blame” (qtd. in Quah, Family in Singapore 130). Clearly, child-bearing and rearing are seen as almost wholly the province and responsibility of the female body. Although the man must obviously participate in some way in the process of reproduction, the male body is not constituted as a vital part of it, but remains detached from the more physical and emotional aspects
of parenthood. The same attitude exists in relation to the inscription of domesticity on male and female bodies. As noted above, women's bodies are assumed to be inherently domesticised while men, as Quah points out, "have seldom, if ever, been seen as homemakers in Singapore" ("Marriage" 40). If a man were to take on a domestic role, he would be seen as feminising his male body. Singapore men are constituted as masculinised, contributing to their society politically and economically, with minimal domestic involvement. For both men and women, heterosexuality is also assumed to be the norm. The expression of corporeal identities which do not follow these prescriptions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality can pose a challenge to state policy. I will argue that in Mergers, apart from the challenge to state-constituted gender identities presented by the choices Ellen makes, Wong also uses Jon as an additional site of negotiation and interrogation of authoritatively-produced identities.

Wong uses the story of Ellen, Jon and Lesley as a framework for interrogating and exploring the inadequacy of state constructions of narrowly defined 'male' and 'female' bodies. The state foregrounds heterosexuality, and actively encourages reproduction within the bounds of state-defined marriage. Mergers, however, "deliberately [sets] out to unsettle and challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and gender within the context of a mainstream culture which tends to portray the lesbian as the outsider and/or deviant" (Lo, "Prison-house" 100). This challenge to dominant assumptions is visible not only in the more obviously marginal characters, but even in such apparently compliant characters as Mary. Mary appears to embody the ideal woman as defined in state terms. She is married and has recently had a child, thus fulfilling her reproductive duty within the bounds of heterosexual marriage. She has since returned to work, with a maid handling her domestic chores; thus, she is also considered to be doing her duty for the country's economy. However, she does not function as a mere mouthpiece for or representation of state rhetoric; rather, Wong uses her situation to comment (albeit peripherally) on the plight of Singaporean women who face the pressure to conform to authoritatively-inscribed standards. Some of Mary's lines hint at the difficulties she faces and the sacrifices she is forced to make. She says, for example, that one of the partners in the firm called up "when I was on maternity [leave] to ask when I could start handling the file again!" (Mergers 5). Although she is
actively encouraged to be a mother, she is not allowed to be 'economically unproductive.'

Mary represents mainstream, normative society, but does not adopt all the value judgements assumed by that society. Importantly, she is quietly sympathetic to and understanding of Ellen's position. Her responses generally indicate that she does not see Ellen as being deviant; for example when Ellen discusses her relationships with women, Mary refers to Ellen's personal failure to maintain a relationship, rather than suggesting that a lesbian relationship is in itself wrong. Indeed, she even implicates herself in the lesbian equation by (jokingly?) claiming that she has been in love with Ellen since their schooldays: she tells Ellen, "I've been trying to get Taketo [Mary's husband] to grow his hair like yours since the day we met" (Mergers 26). These responses from the apparently straight and (socially and corporeally) very disciplined Mary unsettle notions of right and wrong, normalcy and deviance.

The challenge to state-ordered discipline of the body comes through most clearly in Ellen. The simple fact that she is the central character and that she identifies herself unambiguously as a lesbian can be seen as a strong challenge to the invisibility of lesbian bodies within state discourse. Both Peterson and Lo note that the portrayal of lesbianism on stage has never attracted the kind of punitive censorship that occurs when gay male relationships are portrayed (Peterson, Theater 137; Lo, "Prison-house" 100). Peterson notes that: "If openly gay Singaporean men are few in number, then lesbians are all but invisible" (Theatre 135). Lim Kean Fan states that "lesbianism is totally unrecognised by the law, which can be construed as an even more extreme form of oppression" (1765). Where the law takes punitive measures against male homosexuals, female homosexuality is not mentioned at all; it is assumed to simply not exist. Wong's play provides a site in which the "invisible" can be made visible. The process of being made visible takes the form of verbal statements, such as Ellen's unequivocal declaration that she is gay (Mergers 16), or Lesley's announcement to the entire office that "her current girlfriend was back in London and they had an open arrangement" (Mergers 36 – 37). Such clear and open statements make it impossible to ignore the presence of identities which are otherwise unacknowledged.
However, purely verbal statements are not enough. It is by physicalising Ellen’s sexuality that Wong is able to centre lesbianism as a challenge to state-constructed sexual identities. Peterson notes that “there was nothing subdued about either the dialogue or the staging of the scenes featuring the two women. Not only does the couple speak openly about sexual desire; they also kiss onstage” (Theatre 150). The production in Kuala Lumpur also physicalised Ellen and Lesley’s sexual relationship, though less overtly. Where in the Singapore production, their first sexual encounter culminated in a kiss, the Malaysian production had to literally dance around the portrayal of a sexual relationship. A reviewer describes the scene as follows: “Ellen slow-dancing with Lesley (a refined way to show that they are having sex) and speaking about their relationship” (L. A. Tan). Tan’s assumption that the director is merely being “refined” is reductive; the dance is an ingenious way of obliquely presenting a sexual relationship in a society which (due to conservatism inherent not only in state discourse and in the official religion, Islam, but also in most of the other component religions and cultures) does not accept open displays of physical affection. As the script is written, it would have been possible to focus on the spoken word, with perhaps a few fleeting touches between the two women. The director’s decision to physicalise the scene through dance, which allows the women intimate bodily contact, shows the centrality of the physical sexual relationship. By actively engaging in sex, Ellen frees her closeted sexuality. If Mergers is looked at as a Bildungsroman, then at this stage Ellen is further on in the development of her lesbian identity; from merely articulating it verbally, she has gone on to assert that identity through her sexualised use of her body; it is thus made visible and real to the audience.

Wong also physicalises Ellen’s relationship with Jon. Would it therefore be possible to identify Ellen as bisexual, or to assume that she would change if the ‘right man’ came along? That is, could she be reclaimed into the fold of normalcy? Wong undermines this possibility through her approach to the dialogue which precedes the sexual consummation of both relationships. Between Jon and Ellen, there is a certain apparently light-hearted tone; their dialogue is characterised by teasing insults and jokes. Between Ellen and Lesley, however, the conversation is more intense and serious. Here, the interplay between the verbal and the physical shows that it is the relationship with Lesley that is more meaningful to Ellen. Thus Wong hints at the
possibility of Ellen turning to an ‘acceptable’ relationship, but then rejects it, letting Ellen express her true sexuality rather than allowing authority to inscribe a sexual identity on her.

Ellen’s responses to motherhood and household chores destabilise the official constitution of women as maternal, gentle and domesticised. When Jon speaks fondly of Mary’s “beautiful” baby, Ellen responds that babies “remind me of fish at that age;” she counters Jon’s love of children with the rejoinder that children are “tolerable when they’re not mine” (Mergers 8). This response is distant and cool, with none of the sentimentality or the instant nurturing response that is considered natural for women. Ellen thus undermines the stance that women are instinctively and naturally maternal. After the birth of their daughter, Ellen remains distant from her; we are never aware of her interacting with the child, whereas we hear of Jon taking her to the clinic, or out shopping. However Ellen refers to a case she is handling as “my baby” (Mergers 37); emotionally, she is far more absorbed by her job than her child. She thus refuses to be constructed as a mother in the conventionally-accepted sense of the term.

The ‘joy’ of the experience of pregnancy and parenthood seems to belong to Jon, who is shown prancing exuberantly, while Ellen looks on with “indulgent disapproval” (Mergers 33). It is he rather than Ellen who is willing to subdue his careerist impulses to focus on his child. Ellen remarks that children “require commitment,” and that the commitment usually comes from women. She is clearly unwilling to take that step whereas Jon, apparently “a shoo-in for partner,” has considered leaving his career to concentrate on child-rearing (Mergers 8 – 9). Jon’s response runs counter to Singaporean constructions of masculinity. Ellen here takes on what are traditionally considered the male attitudes (ambition, drive, emotional distance from the family) while Jon is willing to embrace the traditional female role. This reversal is underlined by the play-acting indulged in by Jon and Ellen, with Jon playing the docile, subservient ‘wife’ kneeling at the feet of the ‘husband’ who brings home the bacon (Mergers 9).
The stage directions indicate that family photographs of the now-married Jon and Ellen are shown during the interval (Mergers 33). The photographs showing Jon and Ellen handling household chores subvert traditional constructions of male and female roles, with Ellen taking care of ‘masculine’ chores such as fixing lights and working with screwdrivers, while Jon hangs up the laundry. These parodic enactments underscore the constructedness of gender roles by ‘overplaying’ them; if they can be overplayed, it is because they are only ‘played’ in the first place, that is, they are acted rather than inherent. Recalling that performative utterances succeed “not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices” (Butler, “Burning” 207), we can go on to say that playing it ‘badly’ or ‘wrongly’ (that is, differently) will cause the failure of the performative action or utterance. A potential site of failure of the authoritative construction of gender identity is evident in the photograph of Jon and Ellen “doing a mock of Rockwell’s American Gothic,” with Jon holding clothes pegs while Ellen holds a screwdriver (Mergers 33). The original artwork seems to invoke traditional gender roles: the dominant father/husband gazes directly at the viewer, while the subservient daughter/wife stands a little behind and inclines her gaze slightly towards him, not engaging directly with the viewer. In the photograph shown during the 1993 production, Jon holds a ladle while Ellen holds a hammer; both gaze confidently and happily at the camera. Thus the conventions which suggest that there is something wrong with their arrangement are turned on their head, questioning the validity of the Singaporean construction of Jon and Ellen as male and female in the traditional, binarised way.

Jon’s decision to give up his career in favour ofparenthood and domesticity reflects similar decisions made by countless women; at a superficial level, the fact that the decision is taken by a man rather than a woman does to some extent overturn conventional constructions of male and female roles. However, a simple role-reversal does not question the validity of binarised, value-loaded constructions of identity. This is made clear in some of the responses of various reviewers to productions of Mergers

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6 In this discussion I refer mostly to the photographs as described in the printed text. The photographs actually shown during the 1993 production differ slightly, but their intention is clearly the same.
in both Malaysia and Singapore. Referring to the Kuala Lumpur production, Gerald Martinez notes that “Jonathan, a bright and outgoing person, is also finding difficulty in subjugating his nature to be a house-husband” (“Impressive”). With reference to the same production, Tan Ling Ai asserts that Jon’s “ego is deeply bruised, for he has become something he cannot accept ... a jobless man who cooks, cleans, takes care of the child and depends on his wife to feed and clothe him.” The responses from Martinez and Tan show that despite the role-reversal and the potential undermining of traditional authoritative constructs, they are still locked in the thought patterns which view domesticity as demeaning and unnatural for a man. Martinez feels that Jon’s natural personality has to be ‘subjugated;’ Tan devalues his domestic work by dismissing him as ‘jobless.’ The continued dominance of conventional, authority-inscribed thinking about male and female roles is also emphasised by the response of Ng Sek Chow to the 1993 Singapore production: “Jonathan does have a ‘baby fixation’ (he wants a brood), but surely with his good looks and promising career, he should not have much difficulty in finding a straight woman who would be more than willing to fulfil this function for him.” Ng’s critique is reductive of women, who appear in this evaluation to be merely on the lookout for attractive providers, waiting to fulfil their natural biological function as bearers of offspring. Ng also does not take into account Jon’s desire to look after his children himself, rather than just hand the job on to a woman who is waiting to “fulfil this function.”

To focus purely on the obvious role reversal (male/homemaker-female/breadwinner) does not lead to any deep engagement with basic ideas of authoritative construction and inscription of particular roles as ‘male’ and ‘female.’ The critics’ response shows that the division of roles is viewed as natural, and to reverse them is to create an ‘unnatural’ situation. Lo argues that: “Reorganising the male-female dichotomy by giving the female partner a stronger (masculinised) role does nothing to deconstruct the gender economy – it only changes the placement of the terms” (“Prison-house” 103). In other words, the binary relationship remains in place, with greater value being placed on one half of the equation than on the other. I would suggest that a far more complex exploration of the constructedness of men and women as male and female bodies can be achieved if we approach the Jon-Ellen relationship.

7 The painting Wong refers to is actually by Grant Wood.
differently. The reading becomes far more nuanced if Jon is treated not as a simple representation of a straight man, but as a male body (potentially a homosexual body) feminised by Wong’s treatment of him in the script.

Jon, although professedly straight, nonetheless displays a high degree of sexual ambiguity. The absence of an accepting attitude towards homosexuals at the time when Wong wrote *Mergers* meant that specifically male homosexual identities had to remain closeted and that men had to adhere to state disciplining of their bodies into ‘masculinised’ roles. Jon can be seen as a possible representation, albeit disguised, of hidden male homosexuality and the feminised male body. He identifies himself as straight, and frequent reference is made to his relationships with various women; however, as Lo points out, the character includes many elements of high camp which simply do not jibe with his putative ‘straightness’ (“Prison-House” 105 – 106). I do not suggest that Jon is hiding his true sexuality from himself; rather, I believe that by highlighting the ambiguities and uncertainties visible in Jon’s sexuality and its embodiment, and by then focusing on the interactions between Ellen and Jon, Wong has made her arguments about gender identity far more complex than they initially appear. It is in the interactions between Ellen and Jon, rather than only in the Ellen-Lesley relationship, that the most exacting and challenging questioning of the construction of gender identities takes place.

Through the dialogue, Jon is constructed as a ‘normal,’ sexually active heterosexual man – for example through references to his relationships with other women. However, there is a constant subtext running through the play which destabilises this construction. The opening scene shows him on his knees proposing marriage to Mary, and then making suggestive, leering remarks to Ellen; the only adult relationship (physical or emotional) in which we see him engaged during the course of the play is with Ellen. Lo argues that such incidents within the play serve to emphasise the dominance of heterosexuality, leaving “lesbian desire [...] positioned in a supplementary role, in opposition to the dominant heterosexual order” (“Prison-house” 102). By proposing marriage to one woman and then making sexual advances to another, Jon appears to reiterate the heterosexual male-female dyad. Thus the mock marriage proposal and the sexual relationship between Jon and Ellen appear to position
heterosexuality as the dominant order. I would argue, however, that Jon’s actions in fact unbalance that dominance. He proposes to Mary knowing that she cannot, or will not, accept, just as he embarks on the liaison with Ellen in the full knowledge that she is gay. He does not seem to want to embark on a ‘normal’ heterosexual relationship with either woman. His actions do not, in either case, re-entrench the heterosexual frame.

Also significant is the way in which Jon might be physically portrayed on stage. Lo argues that “Jon is in many ways the typical ‘camp male’ [...] who does not perform the stereotypical masculine role” (“Prison-house” 106). Lo has pointed out the significance of the constant references in Jon’s speech to Broadway musicals; his exuberant speech and his flamboyance point to his difference from normative constructions of the male body as dignified and contained, the seat of reason and intellect. Jon cannot realistically be played ‘straight,’ he frequently bursts out singing and dancing, and his speech is overblown and comically theatrical. However, because Wong repeatedly identifies him as heterosexual, she prevents us from being able to respond to him as gay. By embodying a ‘straight’ man within a feminised, sexually ambiguous body, Wong overturns simplistic notions of gender identity.

She continues this project in her portrayal of Jon and Ellen’s marriage of convenience. The need felt by Jon and Ellen to enter into this marriage, simply in order to be allowed the space to fulfil their non-normative gender and sexual identities, speaks of a level of interpellation into the dominant discourse. They are unable, at this stage, to live openly defiant lives. Marriage provides Ellen with a respectable cover (she appears in society’s eyes to have defined herself within the bounds of a normative heterosexual relationship) while allowing her to be involved in lesbian relationships. It is ‘convenient’ for Jon in that his role as househusband allows him to exist within a feminised body. This is no mere case of swapping roles; Jon rejects the purely masculine body within which society has placed him. For example, he declares to Ellen that he wants to have many children: “I want to have them, to look after them, to be there when they fall down, to pick them up” (Merger 9. My emphasis). Note that he does not merely express a desire to have a closer relationship to his children than might be typical for a father; he wants to be physically involved even to the extent of bearing
them himself. The feminisation of Jon’s body — through his desire for children and his flamboyant campness — is deeply unsettling to the construction of men as masculinised, ‘male’ bodies. Although a man, and self-identified as heterosexual, Jon’s body is ‘female’ (according to hegemonic construction), identified as such by his desire for children and domesticity.

The embodiment of Ellen is complex, as she cannot be categorically positioned as either male or female. She identifies herself as a lesbian, and in her relationship with Jon she takes on the male role: as breadwinner, she is embodied as masculine. Yet her relationship with Lesley complicates this masculinity, so that she cannot be categorised as purely butch to Jon’s and/or Lesley’s femme. When they begin their relationship, it is Lesley who takes the dominant role; once the relationship is established, Ellen becomes dominant, taking on the butch role while Lesley is positioned as femme, cooking for Ellen. At various points in this relationship, they switch roles. As Lo points out:

The power dynamics between Ellen and Lesley contributes to the further destabilising of dominant gender and sexual categories. If Ellen comes across as the ‘butch’ lesbian passing as ‘straight’ in her marriage to Jon, her relationship with Lesley destabilises any reification of these roles. The same-sex relationship dismantles the dominant masculine-feminine dyad. (“Prison-house” 108)

Clearly, their relationship cannot be defined as a stable binary, with one partner being male/butch/dominant, and the other female/femme/subservient. The inclusion of Jon in this relationship makes it even more fluid and unstable. The fluidity of the gender roles played by Jon, Ellen and Lesley demands that we recognise fixed and unchanging binary relationships, posited around a male-female dyad, as authoritative constructs rather than as natural positions. Society has performatively constituted dichotomised gender relations; through the complexity of the relationship between Jon, Ellen and Lesley, Wong challenges this dichotomy. By physically embodying gender and sexual identities which cannot be pinned down, she shows these identities to be externally constituted, and deconstructs notions of male and female bodies. Butler comments on the potential for agency that comes from “the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes
the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (\textit{Gender Trouble} 179). Wong’s portrayal of the complexity of gender and sexual identities through the interactions of Jon, Ellen and Lesley emphasises what is ‘discontinuous,’ thus suggesting the possibility of unsettling and interrogating the heterosexual and patriarchal hegemony of the state.

\textbf{Cultural Ideologies and Traditional Family Structures: \textit{Family}}

Where \textit{Mergers} challenges notions of stable, binary gender identities by focusing on the sexual and physical ambiguity of its main characters, in \textit{Family}, Malaysian playwright and actress Leow Puay Tin looks in broader terms at the social positioning of men and women through the inscription of particular traditions and cultural values. This analysis will focus on the construction of the family unit and the positioning of male and female bodies within the hierarchy of the family. Leow challenges the centrality of the patriarch in the family structure, instead foregrounding relationships between women. She interrogates conventional understandings of family, and offers an alternative family structure which displaces the gender dichotomy inherent in the patriarchal framework. However, she also shows an awareness of the high level of internalisation of traditional values and structures. Although constituted by the state and society, they are normalised within everyday discourse, with individuals assisting in their continued domination of everyday life.

Leow has stated that the play was written from her own understanding and experiences as a Malaysian-Chinese woman. However, the events of the play speak to a much wider and more inclusive audience of Malaysian and Singaporean women and men. Ong Keng Sen requested that the play address the position of Singaporean women; however, Leow specifies that although the play is “set in Singapore, the location is not crucial, and the family could just as well have been Malaysian” (“Playwright's Notes” 165). Leow also points out that “not having had the experience of living in Singapore for any length of time, I felt it wiser to use the legend as a basis to study the workings of a successful women-dominated family/clan” (“Playwright’s Notes” 164). Thus the text does not focus on specificities of location, but looks instead at how culture and tradition work to embody women in ways that subjugate and marginalise them, while demanding strength and dominance from men. Leow shows
the insistence on the primacy of stable, binary, hierarchical gender relations to be damaging and reductive.

*Family* tells the story of Mrs. Yang, born in China and married at thirteen to her sixteen-year-old husband. They move to *Nam Yew* or *Nanyang*, the Chinese word for Malaya, where they have seven sons and one daughter. Their lives are a constant struggle against poverty. Eventually Mrs. Yang’s husband, all her sons and her son-in-law die, leaving her to take care of her crippled grandson, daughter and daughters-in-law. Through Mrs. Yang’s hard work and financial acumen they thrive and prosper, turning a simple, home-based cake-selling business into a multi-pronged, matriarchal business empire.

Mrs. Yang’s success is a testament to her extraordinary strength and ability; not only does she enter this male space, she also succeeds in it where the various men in her family have signally failed and yet, because she has stepped out of her authority-identified ‘natural’ space to invade the male space of trade and commerce, she is subject to accusations of being devouring and unnatural. Leow complicates these simple, binary notions of male and female bodies and the spaces which they ‘naturally’ inhabit through her woman-centred play; the two productions of the play add further layers of complexity through elements of performance such as costuming and casting.

The struggle against the dominating tendencies of the patriarchy informs feminism worldwide. In the context in which Leow is writing, the particular focus is on Confucian thought which is explicitly male-centred and patriarchal, implicitly devaluing women and their abilities. It would therefore be appropriate to look more closely at Confucianism and other ideological or religious precepts prevalent in Malaysia and Singapore, and their influence on the construction of the family.

The entrenchment of Confucian ethics in society is central to this play. In *Family*, the Yang family is deeply influenced by the precepts brought with them directly from China. In this, they are similar to other Malayan families of their time: strongly guided by their desire to hold on to imperfectly understood traditional principles and values.
Confucianism straddles different levels: Syed Farid Alatas divides it into 'high' and 'low' Confucianism (115). 'High' Confucianism exists as intellectual discourse but is unlikely, as Alatas points out, to have been familiar to or practised by the majority of the population in China or Malaya, who mainly comprised labourers and farmers rather than scholars (115). This is not to say, however, that Confucianism (specifically low Confucianism) was totally absent from the local Chinese culture; it "remained a core component in the Chinese tradition [...]`. Even though the early immigrants from China were mostly uneducated, Confucian moral teachings had been transmitted over generations through the family and ‘little traditions,’ if not formal teaching” (E. Kuo, "Confucianism as Political"") 10). This is the kind of grassroots understanding of Confucian principles which would have been available to the Yang family, and which therefore informs their social and familial interactions.

Given that the majority of the population in Singapore is ethnically Chinese, and that the government did at one point seek to deliberately inculcate Confucian values, it is not surprising that the discussion of Confucian principles is generally relevant to Singapore. In Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion, Confucianism might be considered relevant only to the minority Chinese population. 8 Indeed, the play does seem to have a certain racial and cultural specificity. Sulin Chee, for example, notes that the play “grapples with the role of women in the region and the dreams and struggles of immigrant Chinese families – inclusive of the Confucian work ethic that has, according to Leow, been ‘slandered and praised for different reasons’ throughout the ages.” Leow points out that her “resources are Chinese because it is by accident of birth that these experiences were available to me” (qtd. in Ambikaipaker).

However, despite an apparent lack of relevance of Confucian principles to the non-Chinese, there are certain basic similarities in the ways in which bodies are constructed across all the main cultures of Malaysia and Singapore, which means that the story of Mrs. Yang and her family can speak to a wider Malaysian or Singaporean audience. Chia Oai Peng has noted the influence of Confucian thought on the

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8 In fact, there have been attempts in Malaysia to reconcile Confucianism and Islam. Osman Bakar suggests that: “A Muslim does not go against the teachings of his or her religion if he makes the claim that Confucius was a prophet of Islam [...]. The Chinese, being an ancient race and civilisation, surely must have received at least one message from Heaven. Confucius deserves to be considered as a candidate for the recipient of that message” (qtd in Alatas 114).
construction of female Chinese identities in Malaysia: “Based upon Confucius teachings, countless moral values had been developed to keep women within bounds and to ensure their centuries old obedience to men” (174). K. S. Susan Oorjitham, referring to the plight of working class Malaysian women of Tamil descent, notes that those women who came to Malaya in the nineteenth century brought with them “the dictum that a wife ought to respect her husband as a god and serve him faithfully even though he were vicious and void of any merit” (116). Roziah Omar points out that according to some Muslim ideologies, women “are commonly believed to be endowed with less akal (reasoning), to be overly emotional and weaker. They need to be taken care of and protected, and their honour needs to be specially guarded” (7). Clearly, women across all these cultures are constructed as being weaker, both physically and intellectually, needing the protection of men.

Concomitant with this devaluation of women is the feminisation of the female body. Chia Oai Peng refers to the Confucian principles of sancong side (obedience to menfolk, grace, virtue, humility) which are “intended to shape a woman into a graceful and gentle doll suitable for aesthetic appreciation only. She is not supposed to be opinionated nor go against her husband’s will, and should conform to all his demands” (177). Raihanah Abdullah notes similar restrictions on Muslim women, who have to “observe complete modesty, forbid [sic] wearing glamorous garments and she should speak in a soft and sweet manner” (151). Most Indian cultures similarly impose rules of modest conduct and graceful demeanour on women, and situate them largely within the domestic sphere. In Family, the Yang women inhabit bodies that are officially defined as delicate and ornamental, dependent on the strong, male bodies of their menfolk.

While it is clear that women were placed in the more disadvantaged position socially and economically, men were also trapped, although in different ways, within equally rigid spaces. In the context of Family, which begins in the early years of the twentieth century, the men who came to Malaya were embodied as strong, necessary, but ultimately expendable labour; we are reminded here of Foucault’s argument that “people’s physical bodies were seen as resources available to meet the interests of the state” (Danaher et. al. 125). Peterson has noted a similar point, stating that Leow “avoids blaming the patriarchy for the plight of women by demonstrating that the men
too were victimised by a system that used them as cheap labour and robbed them of a future" (*Theater* 122). I would question Peterson's argument that the patriarchy is not blamed in Leow's play. Certainly it is true that the men here are shown to be victims of authoritative constructions of their bodies as mere fuel for the drive towards economic progress. However, rather than absolving the patriarchy of blame for the disadvantaged position of women, Leow instead indicts it for trapping both men and women within narrow, confining, sometimes fatal spaces.

Gender construction with reference to roles assumed in the family is central to this play. The published text of the play opens with a quotation from the classical text *I Ching*:

The foundation of the family is the relationship between husband and wife.

Within the family a strong authority is needed. This is vested in the parents. But the tie that holds the family together is the loyalty and perseverance of the wife.

Her place is within whilst that of the husband is without. It is in accord with the great laws of nature that husband and wife take their proper places. (*Family* 169)

This extract sets out the framework of the family, in a form acceptable to the authorities - namely, a family must consist of father, mother, and children. If the only acceptable family model is founded on a relationship between husband and wife (with the husband dominating while the wife takes her place "within"), then any configuration which makes do with only one or the other, but not both, must be considered imbalanced in some way. The same attitude is visible in Malaysian society in general, as evident in this comment from former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad: "we want a family unit to remain, that is, having a husband and wife and their children [...] not a man being married to a man or woman and a woman, or single parenthood" (qtd. in Frith 9). His remarks refuse legitimacy to non patriarchally-defined family structures; in his position as leader of the male-dominated state, he was able to inscribe this ideology on the populace. In relation to *Wills and Secessions*,
Wong interrogates the existence of the same attitude in Singapore: "What gives a family legitimacy?" asks Eleanor, almost fiercely. "Why should one model be validated and others not?" (Joyce Lim 86).

Leow challenges narrow and limiting definitions of family as patriarchy. Through the life story of Mrs. Yang and her family, she demonstrates both the potential fragility of the traditional model, and the strength that can be found in unconventional familial frameworks. In this play, the dominant patriarchal figure slowly disappears, to be replaced by the strong female presence. As the action moves from China to Malaya, there is a distinct change in the position of the patriarch. The ancient social structures are held firm by society in China, but in the newness and chaos of Malayan society, they crumble, revealing their "groundlessness" in the face of the family's immediate needs (Butler, Gender Trouble 179). In China, although Mrs. Yang takes on a male role, she and the society around her make adjustments and negotiations which allow the patriarchy to remain dominant. In Malaya, it becomes clear that similar negotiations are impossible, and entirely new family and social structures are needed. And yet, the authorities and society maintain patriarchy and male dominance as ruling ideologies. Mrs. Yang's story is, therefore, fraught with complex negotiations with the authoritative foregrounding of patriarchy, her own lived experience of successful matriarchy, and her internal confusion and guilt about the 'manly' and 'unnatural' role she has had to play in her life.

Mrs. Yang has, simply in order to survive, stepped outside the borders of her defined 'place,' thus upsetting the family structure which places the man at the centre of the framework. In the I Ching, the woman is subjugated by her positioning "within," in contrast to the man whose place is "without." The woman is thus, in official terms, protected from the outside world of commerce; it is not her 'proper place.' The woman is hampered because she inhabits a body that is supposed to be vulnerable, in need of protection, and incapable of dealing with matters outside the home. The man is presumed to be capable of providing that protection by going out into his proper place, which is outside the home.

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10 We can draw a comparison here with Santha of Sandipu, who is likewise constrained by social practice, but who also, in her own way, breaks free from the constraint.
However, Leow undercuts this assumption throughout the play. Almost every male authority figure in Mrs. Yang’s life (that is, someone who can take his ‘proper place’ as head of the family) is killed by illness or accident, starting with her father, who dies when she is five; the pattern is repeated throughout Mrs. Yang’s life. Her husband’s father and grandfather are both killed when he is an infant. Later, her husband, her sons and her son-in-law all die in Malaya. From the first, it is the male bodies which are shown to be fragile and vulnerable, leaving the women to survive on their own. Thus Mrs. Yang has had, from the age of five, to take on ‘male’ physical attributes. She declares, “I worked as if I were a boy” (*Family* 172), looking after livestock, planting crops, and so on. Mrs. Yang notes that her physically more delicate sister “stayed at home to cook and sew and look after the chickens” – feminine pursuits which keep her within the ‘proper’ borders. As a result, her sister’s “skin was fair and her hair always neatly combed” (*Family* 172). In other words, the sister maintains the inscribed attributes of the female body. Mrs. Yang, by implication, now inhabits a masculinised body, dark-skinned from outdoor labour, with messy hair and rough hands. Mrs. Yang is shown, from very early on, to break beyond the borders inscribed on her body. The sister is able to maintain her female body because Mrs. Yang takes on some of the traits of the male body. And yet, Mrs. Yang clearly does not become a man.

Only male bodies are supposed to function outside the home, and the reaction of the other men towards Mrs. Yang’s anomalous presence among them indicates their discomfort; Mrs. Yang points out that because she has to take on this male role, the other men do not treat her as inhabiting a female body: “although I should be considered a woman since I was married, the men treated me as if I were still a girl, and helped me as before” (*Family* 173). By treating her as a girl (that is, as a pre-pubescent child) rather than as a mature woman, they de-feminise her body; as a woman, she inhabits a body capable of typically feminine functions – menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and so on. In order to accommodate her female body within their male province, they have to de-sex it, to respond to it as a neutered body that has not yet been feminised.

When her husband returns from Malaya, he has lost his desire to do farm work, preferring instead to learn “about herbs, studying the books his father and grandfather
had left him” (Family 173). In the Confucian ethic this preference for studying does not feminise him; rather, he is classed as a scholar. Kam Louie refers to the Chinese philosophical dyad “wen-wu” which, unlike the concept of yin and yang, “is exclusively male, invoking both the mental and the physical as essential” (39); he goes on to point out that “either was considered acceptably masculine” (40). Thus in choosing to focus on the intellectual rather than the physical, Mr. Yang does not become less masculine; Mrs. Yang, however, forced to take on male attributes, is considered less feminine, as there is no corresponding intellectual/physical dyad for women.

Although the households in which Mrs. Yang lives as a child have no male head in practical terms – her father dies, her husband is away – there remains, nonetheless, a consciousness that a patriarch does exist: even as a five-year-old, Mrs. Yang is aware that she has a husband to go to. Later, after their marriage, she knows that despite his absence, he is to be considered the head of the household. However, this awareness of the apparently immutable centrality of the patriarch inheres unproblematically only while she remains in China.

In Malaya, centuries-old traditions begin to slowly break down under the stress of life in a harsh, foreign climate and the needs of society and the authorities. The wen-wu dyad, for example, would have less currency in an environment as physically challenging as that of Malaya; the primary need in Malaya in the early twentieth century (the time when Mrs. Yang migrated) was for a large amount of physical labour, with little room for scholars. A man’s primary role in Malaya would be physical. Scholarship would therefore have been relatively devalued; if masculinity inheres in physical strength and the ability to work hard, then intellectualism feminises the ‘male’ body by keeping it indoors and away from physical work.

Mr. Yang’s intellectualism, accepted in China, translates in Malaya into ineffectiveness as breadwinner. He goes bankrupt three times, and falls continually into debt because he stands guarantor to people who “borrowed money and then ran back to China” (Family 176), a fact which characterises him as foolishly naïve and trusting; Mrs. Yang thinks of him as “a useless man” (Family 176) because he cannot adequately provide for his family. She eventually gathers enough money, on her own,
to buy the shophouse in which they live. Mrs. Yang describes her husband’s reaction to
this news: “He was shocked when he found out, he felt ashamed. But what could he
do?” (Family’ 177). His response indicates his helplessness; he is unable to take any
action, although as putative head of the family, he is meant to be in control.

Leow’s portrayals of the Yang men and their fates indicates that, having come
to Malaya, they seem to have completely lost control. The harsh physical conditions
prevailing in Malaya render them vulnerable to fatal illnesses, devastating industrial
accidents, even to enemy bombs. Peterson points out that: “Even though men are
supposed to take care of matters ‘outside’ the household in a traditional Confucian
context, the reality is that they often die first, leaving the women behind to fend for
themselves” (Theater 121). While the deaths of Mrs. Yang’s father, and Mr. Yang’s
father and grandfather, in China also suggest a level of physical vulnerability for men,
the patriarchal, Confucian-based social structure nonetheless remains in place. In
Malaya, however, such structures begin to break down. Eddie Kuo notes, for example,
that in the early days of Chinese female migration to Malaya, unequal male-female
power relationships began to even out slightly, and that “there was a concomitant
ascendence in the status of maternal relatives” (“Confucianism and the Chinese” 5).
Thus where Confucianism decrees that a married woman belongs to her husband’s
family, the shifting and uncertain social structures of Malaya meant that often,
maternal rather than paternal families took on a more central role. Yet despite this
experience of lived reality, the inscribed social structure continued to emphasise the
primacy of the patriarch.

If the ‘acceptable’ family structure is found to be unworkable, what validity
does it have to an individual’s lived experience? Mrs. Yang’s answer is to circumvent
her husband in order to provide for her family, thus implicitly assuming the role of
head of the household. Given the assumption that women must be protected by the men
in their family, the loss of all the men should render the family helplessly vulnerable.
However, Leow does not present the deaths of the men as debilitating; the absence of
men in the family allows Mrs. Yang to take on the role reserved for the masculinised
body and make the family secure and successful.
The Confucian concept of family centralises the patriarch, as do most other religious ideologies. The primacy of the male is considered not only right and proper, but an absolute necessity for the bestowal of official recognition. A family unit without a male at its head is considered non-normative. However, Mrs. Yang is shown to be at her most successful within unconventional family structures which centre on women rather than men. After the death of her father, for example, Mrs. Yang survives within a community of women, because her mother refuses to send her to the home of her future husband. The family thus becomes non-normative, consisting of only a mother and two daughters. Leow’s community of women redefines the concept of family by displacing the centrality of the male body within the structure, and by questioning the binary division of male and female. Whereas in China entrenched social conditioning ensures that the man continues to be centralised and privileged, conditions in Malaya lead to the discursive failure of these binaries, and offer possibilities for change.

Leow explores and celebrates an alternative family structure in this play, by foregrounding the community of women. The change in title from The Yang Family to Family, by removing the patriarchal surname, highlights the move away from inscriptive, patriarchally-centred definitions of what constitutes a family, to concepts which are more in tune with the individual’s lived experience. Mrs. Yang’s experience is of security within the society of women; the men in her life are vulnerable to the constant attacks on their bodies, and their presence does not provide the stability that is assumed to be a part of the patriarchal family structure. Thus ‘family,’ in Mrs. Yang’s lived experience, is the close and supportive community of women.

Leow underscores the strength and ability of the Yang women; her portrayal of the women is vibrant and lively, but there is less energy and individualisation in her portrayal of the sons. In the episode entitled “Dear Mother,” for example, the sons speak in a single voice. The daughters-in-law, in contrast, are individualised by name and character. They are passionate and quarrelsome; among them, we see an expression of individual emotion that is not so visible with their husbands. In the “Kueh Sellers’ Song/Chant” they demonstrate that there is a sense of community, chanting “Our kitchen is hot and alive / As we quarrel, we laugh, we work” (Family 184). Any

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11 Kueh is the Malay word for cake.
comfort and strength that the women in this play find comes from other women. When Mrs. Yang first arrives in Namyew, she is fearful of the foreign sights and sounds around her, and wants nothing more than to flee. The advice of an older woman puts Mrs. Yang’s situation in perspective: reminded that she needs to look after her husband and son, she learns how to deal with her new life. The nine widows – Mrs. Yang, her daughter, and her daughters-in-law – also derive strength from each other.

The “Song of the Family” celebrates the success of this female-centred restructuring of the traditional familial framework. The song declares that: “No child has turned out bad,” that the Yang family is “[t]he little moral miracle / Of our down-trodden street.” The unity of the family is affirmed: “We are a family / I belong to you / And you to me” (Family 204). Here the family is defined as a community of belonging, rather than as a hierarchical framework, and this seems to be fundamental to their success. But ultimately, the women are identified by the society around them as “a family of dragons” (Family 205). The dragon is the most powerful symbol in the Chinese cosmology, and is considered too powerful to be borne by women. Dragon women are strong and consuming, rather than gentle and nurturing. They contain too much of the male ‘essence,’ and are therefore not ‘proper’ women.

Despite their success, then, the Yang women remain entrapped by the harshly judgmental dictates of a patriarchal society. The episodes discussed above indicate society’s responses to them as powerful, independent women. Interestingly, however, these same, restrictive precepts are internalised and reproduced even by the Yang women themselves. As Peterson argues: “One of Leow’s principal thematic concerns in [...] Family [...] is the way in which traditional concepts of womanhood continue to play themselves out through successive generations” (Theater 120). Mrs. Yang, for example, reinforces the inscription of purity and chastity on female bodies when her eldest daughter-in-law, Tua Soh, asks for permission to remarry six years after her husband’s death. Mrs. Yang refuses permission, declaring that: “A good woman marries once, only sluts have more than one husband” (Family 194). Tua Soh is clearly lonely and longing for more children, but Mrs. Yang imposes patriarchal values on her body: women must be modest, undemanding, and chaste. Mrs. Yang’s own barrier-
breaking actions are predicated on simple economic necessity rather than on ethical or philosophical considerations. She does what she does in order to survive.

Fundamentally, Mrs. Yang’s actions and reactions are still guided and governed by Confucian inscriptions on the female body. This is despite her own reactions against such authoritative embodiment. She is, for example, horrified by the thought of being a child-wife. She remembers seeing a child-wife and her mother-in-law: “The girl’s hands were tied together, and the woman was hauling her by the rope and beating her with a stick” (Family 171), the mother-in-law trying to exert control over the child’s body. The child defies this control by jumping into the lake and dragging the older woman with her – freedom at the cost of her life. Mrs. Yang declares that she “would have cut off [her] braids and dressed as a boy and run far away” rather than endure such a life (Family 171). Just as the child-wife frees herself from entrapment within the female body by destroying that body, Mrs. Yang would prefer to reject her female body and take on a male body. To some extent this is what she does. But despite this, she remains entrapped by social considerations of male and female roles.

Peterson argues that despite the maleness that Mrs. Yang has to take on, she remains a conscientious wife as constituted by Confucianism: “Even though necessity ultimately requires Tan Neo to venture out in order to support her family, she remains loyal to the family and to the memory of her husband, thus in her own way ultimately living up to the dictum ‘A good wife is persevering and loyal.’” (Theater 122). The suggestion here is that she has in some way, to her own satisfaction, balanced the tension between necessity (the need to play a male role) and the force of social values (the pressure to be a “good wife”). I would argue that the tension remains unresolved, and that the lack of resolution comes through clearly in the last few scenes as Mrs. Yang begins to die. In the episode entitled “Storm Two,” she recalls the power that she, as dominant matriarch, had over her sons, lamenting that: “They obey me. They are frightened of me. They do everything I tell them” (Family 260). Their obedience to her demands and advice leads to their deaths; society lays the blame at Mrs. Yang’s feet, saying that she was “born in the year of the tiger” (Family 200), also a strong and ‘unwomanly’ birth sign. She should not, in other words, have had that level of power over her family. As a woman, it is considered unnatural for her to be in the dominant
position. These are the very qualities which allow Mrs. Yang to survive and prosper, but they are also the qualities which earn her the disapproval of a society which demands deference and weakness from its women. She is well aware that social opinion of her is predicated solely on her gender:

MRS. YANG: Ah, Father! Mother! Why was I born a woman! I should have been a man! Then they will not accuse me! My husband would have been my wife, and I would have been a father to my children. Then all that I had done would be right in the eyes of heaven and men. (Family 262)

What is considered acceptable in a man is unacceptable, even unnatural, in a woman. As she draws closer to death, Mrs. Yang hears three female voices calling her “usurper,” “castrator,” and “unnatural woman” (Family 261); these words express her crime in the eyes of society – she has stolen the man’s position as ‘sovereign’ of the household, she has thus ‘unmanned’ the men in her family, and she is therefore deviant. Three male voices then urge her to “be brave,” “be confident,” and “be strong” (Family 262) in the face of societal disapproval.

These male and female voices can be read as Mrs. Yang’s inner voices, compelling her to make different, contradictory responses. When she hears the male voices, representing those aspects of her character which are not considered natural to the female body, she cries out “I listened to you all my life and did what you told me to do. But you taught me to do the wrong things. You forgot that I was only a woman” (Family 262). She has been responding all her life to the need to work like a man and to take the man’s position in the family hierarchy; but it has meant that she has had to subordinate the purely womanly behaviour inscribed on her by a patriarchal society. The male and the female are mingled in Mrs. Yang; she cannot be categorically marked as either one or the other, and yet authority demands precisely such division and labelling, creating the tension we now see in Mrs. Yang. This tension arises partly from Mrs. Yang’s own conviction that she was behaving purely as a woman: “Please do not be angry. I have tried to be a good woman. I had taken care of my family as well as any woman could” (Family 264). All the ‘male’ characteristics which she has exhibited are linked to what she sees as the ‘female’ instinct to nurture her family.
Although the focus in the published text is on identity construction and gender relations within a family, the structure of the text allows the directors considerable leeway in adding layers of meaning. The play is written in episodes (what Leow calls "building blocks or modules") rather than acts or scenes; in its published form, the play is loosely chronological in structure. Leow states that: “The choice of time [as an organising structure] was an arbitrary one, because other organising factors would have served better dramatically – for example, thematic development” (“Playwright’s Notes” 162). Both the Singapore and Kuala Lumpur productions take advantage of this flexibility by introducing parallel texts and graphics external to Leow’s script, as well as by siting the productions in highly unusual, non-theatrical venues.

The Singapore production was set in an old shophouse; set dressing was minimal, but there were numerous television screens as well as other audio-visual equipment. The ‘old’ Singapore of shophouses and family-run businesses was thus visually married to the new, modern, high-technology Singapore. Nantha Kumar states that TheatreWorks “elected to discover the cultural legacy and tradition of the island republic that is at sea with a perpetual image crisis.” The crisis, in this context, is that of Asian identity. TheatreWorks collaborator Mathew Ngui sees the production as a response to the frequent assertion that “Singapore has lost its culture, it is completely Westernised;” by working on a play which asserts a strongly Chinese identity, setting it within a physical frame which also emphasises Chineseness (most businesses were run by Chinese families), and then adding the modern, ‘Western’ dimension represented by technology, directors Moorthy and Ong suggest an organic, hybrid Singaporean-Chinese identity. Does this, then, represent the Singapore identity? Singaporean writer Colin Cheong asserts that a racially-transcendent Singaporean identity has been “synthesised” (“Interview” 331). However, the unproblematised focus on the Chinese identity here does suggest that the vexed question of race has not been adequately considered.

The Malaysian production was set in a mansion once belonging to the family of prominent entrepreneur Yong Shook Lin, which sits on prime real estate in the centre of Kuala Lumpur. The contrasting choice of venues is interesting. By using a shophouse, TheatreWorks emphasised the family’s humble beginnings and their initial
struggles; a shophouse was precisely the kind of place in which they would have lived before becoming prosperous. The shophouse also stood as a visual reminder of Singapore's humble beginnings. The Kuala Lumpur production, however, focused on the family's later wealth, as suggested by the use of a house which once belonged to a rich and prominent family. There is, however, a mocking edge to this emphasis on wealth: the house was dilapidated and shabby, dwarfed by the looming presence of the nearby Petronas Twin Towers; the family's clothes bespoke wealth, but little taste – costume designer Victor Goh in fact "used lots of glitter in scenes where the Yangs are portrayed as ostentatious rich folk" (Shanmugam). The play was written in 1994, when Malaysia was still one of the miraculous Asian tigers; by 1998, when Family was staged in Kuala Lumpur, the miracle had disintegrated. It is possible to read the direction taken in this production as a response to the shattering of the economic dream, with the loud, tasteless costumes and crumbling, once-grand mansion representing the ultimately empty promises of wealth.

In contrast with the Singapore production, FAC chose to confront Malaysia's racial complexity. Krishen Jit states that: "The play is about a Chinese family in Malaysia. That doesn't mean much in Singapore where most of the people are Chinese. But in Malaysia, we thought it would be most interesting to have the reaction of the other races" (qtd. in Martinez, "Offbeat"). Jit's remark underscores the common perception of Singapore's increasingly Chinese identity. An interesting point to note is that the parallel texts used in the TheatreWorks production "were mostly speeches by Lee Kuan Yew" (Martinez, "Offbeat"), suggesting through this one powerful, iconic figure the extent of the intrusion of the patriarchal state into private matters, as well as the extent to which a Singaporean identity is centred around his views and pronouncements. The decision in the Malaysian production to solicit parallel texts from specifically non-Chinese writers means that race remains a central consideration. Kumar states that the declared aspiration of the Malaysian production "was to seek a Malaysian context to Leow Puay Tin's play;" clearly, the Malaysian context is still very much predicated on race as the central defining factor.

The Kuala Lumpur production dismantles ideas of fixed gender identities by focusing on the idea of 'playing.' Jit and co-director Wong Hoy Cheong decided on
“the carnivale as the over-riding metaphor of the performance” (Atwel 21). Playing *Family* as carnivale entails, among other things, cross-gender casting and colourful, bizarre costuming – robes, ballgowns, tailcoats, feathered head-dresses. Images of masked balls and disguises point to the notion of identity as artifice, a created costume that is assumed and can, therefore, be removed. Stability of gender identity is undermined by the exaggerated playfulness of the production.

Casting choices further undermine notions of stability. In many instances, gender reversal in casting can create a knowing, mocking atmosphere; such performances carry an underlying suggestion that what is being presented is in fact *not* natural, that a woman portraying a man or vice versa is a parodic act. In these productions, however, cross-gender casting which does not seem parodic or ‘playful’ forces questions about what is or is not male or female. The directors of both productions of *Family* play with ambiguity rather than with parody.
Both Ong and Jit have made some interesting, even daring, choices in the casting and costuming of their actors, using their bodies to confront and challenge traditional constructions of gender. Seet describes casting and costuming for the TheatreWorks production:

Ong Keng Sen, when directing Leow's *Family*, opted for gender-neutral costumes paired with red stilettos. The fact that he cast mostly male actors in the roles of the Yang women further signalled the 'not but' critique of gender representation. Having a man play a woman while dressed in costumes that combined features of both the masculine and the feminine underlines the arbitrariness of gender categories. ("Reclaiming" 518).

The physical representation of these female characters complicates simplistic binary divisions of gender categories. Despite the presence of red stilettos, the male performers are not dressed in drag, that is, they are not enacting female bodies in the same way as do transvestites or female impersonators. However, the red stilettos ensure that they cannot be viewed as being purely male. Gender-neutral costuming allows a
blurring and questioning of sharply divisive gender boundaries. The actors' bodies incorporate both male and female so that (for the duration of the performance) they are not strictly 'either' male 'or' female.

As with the Singapore production, cross-gender casting is also significant in the Kuala Lumpur production. The portrayal of Mrs. Yang is complicated by the fact that she is played by two performers, a man and a woman: "Lee Swee Keong and Pearlly Chua both depict Mrs. Yang: two bodies, one character" (Atwel 20). Here Mrs. Yang is literally embodied as both male and female; neither performer is presented as the 'real' Mrs. Yang, and there can therefore be no categorical pronouncements about her as either male or female. The performance of the play itself disrupts the textual presentation of Mrs. Yang. Mrs. Yang absorbs society's criticism of her actions, and dies apologising for the male/female body she has inhabited in life. The performance, however, presents that same male/female ambiguity in a confronting and unapologetic manner, challenging societal constructions of the body.

Conclusion

Both playwrights thus question prevailing ideas of male and female bodies and their proper roles in society. Women are generally seen as being purely of the body, in so far as they are defined by their reproductive functions; male bodies are constructed as having a place outside the home, in the role of breadwinner. However, where feminist theory concentrates largely on the embodiment of women, the two playwrights also examine male embodiment, revealing it to be potentially as limiting and reductive as female embodiment. They seek a level of corporeality which embraces attributes currently dichotomised as specifically 'male' and 'female,' thus attempting to overcome the authoritative construction of gender identities as oppositional binaries.

In their attempts, they also undermine the primacy of men in the hierarchy of the family. Ellen, for example, refuses to be subordinated to Jon even though they have married, that is, they have entered into a social contract which assigns a particular devalued role to the woman. Similarly, Jon does not see his 'feminine' role as unfit for him as a man. Mrs. Yang, like Ellen, takes on the role of the breadwinner of the family; she unsettles traditional Confucian understandings of the family hierarchy and a
woman's place within it. Through the restructuring of male and female roles, both Leow and Wong manage to suggest alternative family structures which are determined by the needs and desires of the individual, rather than constructed by the state.

However despite these re-examinations of the embodiment of men and women and their positions within the hierarchical structure of the family, Leow and Wong leave their protagonists still battling and negotiating with a hardened, unchanging society. Both Ellen and Mrs. Yang are, potentially at least, subject to speculation and derision from society because of the unconventional positions they inhabit. Wong leaves us somewhat uncertain about Ellen's decisions; she has continued with her relationship with Lesley, but is still not sure how committed she is to it. Mrs. Yang absorbs society's criticism of her actions, and inscribes patriarchal norms on her daughters-in-law. We are left, therefore, with a strong sense of the overwhelming power of the state to oversee and dictate the construction of the individual's body, by normalising the dictates of the patriarchy.

Wong's play keeps its focus on the individual; the directors of Leow's play, however, took it into the realm of the national identity. Through the productions, they examined and questioned racial, cultural and national identities. The TheatreWorks production of Family does not grapple with the complexities of race in Singapore, seeming to believe with Colin Cheong that a racially-transcendent Singaporean identity has already been synthesised. The Kuala Lumpur production, however, foregrounds racial matters because of an awareness of how central race still is to personal relationships; clearly a racially-transcendent identity is a yet-to-be-achieved goal. In the next chapter, which looks at intercultural performances, we see an amplification of these approaches. Where TheatreWorks seems to be reaching out for a larger 'Asian' identity on the assumption that the Singapore identity has been created, FAC concentrates on negotiating with the nuances of a hybrid Malaysian identity.
Chapter Five

Constructing Regional and Local Identities Through Interculturalism: Desdemona and Scorpion Orchid

Going to the theatre on a fairly regular basis in Kuala Lumpur, one soon becomes somewhat familiar with other members of the audience at English-language plays, at least by sight. One tends to see the same faces from performance to performance – largely middle- to upper-middle class, mainly Indian and Chinese, with a fair sprinkling of Malays and ‘Others.’ This familiarity is occasionally disrupted, however, for very telling reasons. When, for example, Allan Perera and Indi Nadarajah first staged their play *Quid Pro Quo* in 1996, the audience was overwhelmingly Indian; this was largely because the play dealt with middle-class, educated, Indian characters, a sector very much neglected on the Malaysian stage (what little Indian representation there is, tends to focus on the working class). A similar phenomenon is visible on the rare occasions when theatre groups from India stage productions of Indian plays (in English) in Kuala Lumpur. Clearly, middle-class Indians in Malaysia are hungry for plays which stage experiences closer to their own, even if these plays are imported from India.

What this hunger reflects is both complicity with, and a reaction against, authoritative constitutions of racial identities. By so visibly embracing the label ‘Indian,’ Malaysians of sub-continental origin are engaged in the re-enforcement of restrictive cultural spaces. And yet, by so overwhelmingly supporting these representations of *middle-class*, English-speaking Indians, they reject the authoritative definitions of ‘Indians,’ as generally perceived in Malaysia, as marginal and disadvantaged.

This suggests the continued search for a space of belonging, although that search has now become increasingly refined and complex. During the nation-building phase, the thinking was in much broader conceptual terms: how does an ‘Indian’ or ‘Chinese’ group fit into Malaysia or Singapore? At the time, ties to the original homelands were still close, and the basic question being asked was about the loyalty and emotional investment of individuals who were, until recently, subjects of another
country. As individuals asked what their position would be in these newly-independent nations, the theatre explored possibilities of sharing and of producing intentional and organic hybridity.

These same questions are still being asked, but on a transnational scale. The central question now is not about the identity of the nation per se, but the identity of that nation and its people within a community of other nations. Concerns of identity approach a wider, regional scale, as reflected microcosmically in the desire of Malaysian Indians to connect with Indians from the subcontinent, without renouncing their Malaysian identity. Politically, the desire to connect across nations was visible from fairly early on in the histories of independent Malaysia and Singapore; both are founding members of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), an association which respects the political independence of its member nations, but also asserts and builds common ground among them. The East Asian Economic Grouping, a more recent effort, also points to a similar desire to build an identity that stretches beyond purely national borders. As nations and individuals begin to test the porosity of national borders, a similar testing of cultural borders is taking place in the theatre, reflecting this search for an identity within a transnational context. From this search, an identity must emerge which cannot, logically, be singular or essentialised.

Unlike chapters three and four, which dealt more closely with private experience, chapter five moves the focus outward once again. The central concerns of the playwrights and theatre practitioners dealt with in this chapter are identities on a wider socio-political scale, whether locally or regionally. The theatrical works under discussion in this chapter both engage with hybridity as central to the question of identity in Malaysia and Singapore; in the case of Singapore, TheatreWorks Artistic Director Ong Keng Sen plays with the idea of a pan-Asian hybridity, while Krishen Jit of Malaysia’s Five Arts Centre (FAC) focuses on organic hybridity as experienced within Malaysian borders, approaching the question through intentionally hybrid practice. Both directors approach these issues through intercultural performance.

The focus of this chapter will be performances of Desdemona by TheatreWorks, and Scorpion Orchid (Scorpion) by the FAC. Desdemona was co-commissioned by The Adelaide Festival Corporation and The Singapore Arts Festival; it premiered at the
Adelaide Festival of Arts in March 2000, and then moved to the Singapore Arts Festival in June 2000. In July 2000, the production travelled to Germany, and in November 2001, it was presented as a gallery installation at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. Ong directed all these performances.

Lloyd Fernando originally wrote *Scorpion* as a novel, which was published in 1976. The novel was then re-worked as a play in 1994. Krishen Jit and Singaporean Lok Meng Chue directed the play for TheatreWorks, for presentation at the 1994 Singapore Arts Festival. Jit then collaborated with Joe Hasham of The Actors Studio in Kuala Lumpur to present the play in Malaysia in 1995, with Hasham and Jit co-directing.

The productions of *Desdemona* and *Scorpion* represent different modes of intercultural exchange and performance, which reflect the differing attitudes of both companies and the directors to the development of a local cultural identity. For Ong and Jit, intercultural performance represents a means of resisting and questioning the cultural and racial identities performatively constituted in accordance with official policies of multiculturalism and multiracialism. Where multiculturalism posits a policy of harmony through separation, interculturalism seeks active engagement with other cultures. Debate about interculturalism takes place most commonly within the context of performance, with leading theatre practitioners such as Rustom Bharucha, Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkine and (locally) Ong Keng Sen and Krishen Jit, using the vocabulary of intercultural performance as a means of exploring new spaces of expression.

Intercultural exchange is a controversial form of practice, as it is open to charges of cultural colonialism and misappropriation (as will be discussed further on in this chapter). However, it is also potentially a site of dialogue and interaction, and can therefore challenge the rhetoric of separation apparent in both Malaysia and Singapore. In this chapter I argue that the two theatre groups use intercultural performance in contrasting ways. Ong appears to work within state constructions of a transnational Asian identity for Singapore; his work attempts to examine the problems inherent in the constitution of such an identity. Jit, on the other hand, focuses on the local rather
than the regional, negotiating with the construction of a Malaysian identity which crosses racial and cultural borders within the state.

**Interculturalism**

There is a possibility, in the practice of interculturalism, for the production of cultural identities which challenge the essentialised, 'preserved' identities created by the authorities, forcing an engagement with the terms from which these identities are constructed, and examining the degree to which they are accepted and internalised. Any attempt to construct a new cultural identity must take multiplicity into account, to reflect the reality of everyday life in Malaysia and Singapore. Kuo Pao Kun calls Singaporeans 'cultural orphans' and advocates an 'Open Culture' which challenges essentialist constructions of cultural identity, and suggests drawing both on culture connected with an individual's 'ethnic' group, and on "all the cultures and civilizations in the world" (qtd. in Bharucha, "Consumed" 10–11). Kuo's stance on the cultural orphanhood of Singaporeans points to their separation from the roots of the cultures which are officially assigned to them. Because dogged adherence to these roots will not provide parentage, it is necessary to produce a different culture from that which is available. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore the production of a different culture could logically be an intercultural project.

Interculturalism is a complex and contested field, viewed by various theorists either as a means of bringing together diverse cultures in a meaningful dialogue, or as a kind of cultural neo-colonialism, a further expression of the dominance of the West over the East. This view is fostered by the ideas and attitudes of western commentators and practitioners such as Patrice Pavis, Richard Schechner, and Peter Brook. Pavis, for example, introduces his idea of "a theatre of culture(s)" from the dominant western perspective, stating that: "Never before has the western stage contemplated and manipulated the various cultures of the world to such a degree" (1). Schechner admits that: "Some very sinister forces are present in interculturalism. [...] First off, it is

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1 Kwok Kian-Woon notes that the official view of tradition and culture is that they are something to be "preserved;" however, "the notion of 'preservation' [implies] that what is preserved is something already quite dead and that what we try to do is to keep it from decaying or decomposing further" ("Problem" 17).
people from the economically advantaged places that are able to travel and import” (313).

Generally, then, it can be said that interculturalism is “based on a hierarchy of privilege” (Lo and Gilbert 42). Pavis, referring to his hourglass model of intercultural theatre, does suggest that the arrangement of the hierarchy can be “turned upside down as soon as the users of a foreign culture ask themselves how they can communicate their own culture to another target culture” (5). However, this model still limits intercultural interaction to movement in only one direction at a time, from source to (usually) single target. Moreover, it assumes that both source and target cultures have equal access to power (Lo and Gilbert 42), and can choose at will to reverse the flow.

Bharucha, however, asserts that power is in the hands of the dominant, western “target” or ‘consuming’ culture, despite the rhetoric which aims to suggest otherwise. Pavis is also aware that the balance of power favours the West. Discussing the “appropriation” of one culture by another, he notes “that the adapter and the receptor take possession of the source culture according to their own perspectives; hence the risk of ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism in this case” (16).

The whole concept of appropriation of cultures is problematic. There is an assumption, visible in the works of such frontline practitioners of intercultural theatre as Schechner and Brook, that it is entirely possible to know someone else’s culture through a performance of it. Schechner, for example, advocates “actually doing [different cultures...]. So that ‘them’ and ‘us’ is elided, or laid experientially side-by-side” (314). His comment on the elision of ‘them’ and ‘us’ through intercultural performance underlines the glibness of his vision; he does not problematise the social, political, and economic situations which lead to the existence of a “them” and “us” dichotomy. He implies further that the entire meaning of a culture lies within the performance of it, rather than within the social framework in which it is embedded.

Intercultural experiments such as those mentioned above are viewed by commentators such as Una Chaudhuri and Bharucha as little more than cultural dilettantism that leads merely to an unreflective appropriation of one culture’s

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2 See Bharucha, Theatre 1 – 2, and Politics 35
traditions by another culture. Chaudhuri notes that “the West helps itself to the forms and images of others without taking the full measure of the cultural fabric from which these are torn” (193). Bharucha, too, takes exception to the decontextualising and dehistoricising tendencies of intercultural theatre practitioners who seem “more eager to synthesize underlying patterns of structure/process in differing performance traditions rather than to confront their individual histories” (Theatre 3). These intercultural practices are reductive, taking the source cultures out of their historical and social contexts; practitioners appropriate only that which already fits their ideas.

Chaudhuri suggests a more challenging vision of intercultural performance when she states that: “A practical interculturalism would not simply reproduce already established (and hence already politically coded) images of cultural difference; instead it would produce the experience of difference” (196). Bharucha contends that “the struggle of intercultural exchange lies precisely in working through these contradictions emerging from distinct, yet related histories. While this makes for messy, and occasionally painful encounters, I, for one, cannot see it being actualized otherwise” (Theatre 247). Both these comments imply that the key point in interculturalism lies not in unearthing apparent similarities between diverse cultures and thus universalising them, nor in merely celebrating difference, but in confronting the conditions which have created these differences, in moving beyond codes of difference produced by political hegemonies, and in allowing those differences to be different and specific, rather than trying to subsume them into some universal practice. This is the kind of performative practice which challenges what has been reiterated and normalised.

Intercultural practice must find a mode of working which functions on a more complex two-way flow, rather than the one-way flow posited by most current models. Lo and Gilbert have suggested a model for intercultural exchange which positions the target culture as being along a continuum between two cultural sources (44). Bharucha, commenting on the one-way flow implicit in Pavis’s model of interculturalism, asks: “Where then are the crossroads of intercultural traffic?” (Theatre 242). Perhaps it emerges in this model of two-way flow, where the target culture is not a pre-existing culture which is merely going to absorb elements from the source culture, but is a new culture which takes on elements from various sources. It is precisely at the crossroads,
that is, at that point where two cultures meet, clash, integrate and disintegrate, that a new, intentionally hybrid culture can emerge. Can practitioners, by deliberately bringing together various cultural elements in one performance, actually create these points of intersection? Can they thus deliberately produce a new culture? The crossroads of intercultural performance can be viewed as a space of performative potential, from which a new paradigm of cultural identity can emerge.

In discussing the practice of intercultural theatre by TheatreWorks and the FAC, I will refer to terms as defined by Lo and Gilbert. Beneath the general heading of 'intercultural theatre' they have identified three sub-genres, namely transcultural, intracultural, and extracultural theatre (37 - 38). The work to be discussed in this chapter falls broadly into the subcategories “intracultural” and “extracultural” theatre.3

Lo and Gilbert state that: “Intracultural theatre is Rustom Bharucha’s term to denote cultural encounters between and across specific communities and regions within the nation” (38). According to Bharucha, “intracultural” is a term that he “was compelled to invent” for himself in the face of a general lack of recognition of its existence (Politics 6). Pavis has also used the term, but in a reductive sense, to refer “to the traditions of a single nation, which are very often almost forgotten or deformed, and have to be reconstructed” (20). This definition assumes not only that traditions existing within the boundaries of one nation are severely ailing, but also that a single nation might have one uniform set of traditions. Bharucha re-defines the phrase to refute these assumptions, stating that “‘intra’ [...] refers more pertinently to the differences that exist within the boundaries of a particular region in what is assumed to be a homogenized culture” (Politics 8 - 9). He views intraculturalism as having the potential to explode “organicist notions of culture by highlighting the deeply fragmented and divided society [...] that the multicultural rhetoric of the state refuses to acknowledge” (Politics 9). While Bharucha uses the term to challenge the “notion of cohesiveness” that is assumed in a multicultural state (Politics 9), it can also be applied to the already divided cultures that prevail in Malaysia and Singapore. The Malaysian and Singaporean states demand that individuals of immigrant stock give their

3 Lo and Gilbert define transcultural theatre as aiming "to transcend culture-specific codification in order to reach a more universal human condition." (37). In Scorpion and Desdemona it is the awareness of difference rather than the search for commonality or universality which dominates. Transcultural theatre
allegiance to the ancient cultures of China, India, or Europe (specifically Portugal), thus attempting to create a kind of intra-racial cohesiveness while maintaining the divide along inter-racial lines. By focusing on the multiplicity of cultures available within the nation, apart from those that are officially identified, intraculturalism can challenge the "notion of cohesiveness," thus more sharply and critically questioning the basis of the national identity. Furthermore, because it is open to dialogue with 'unofficial' cultures, intracultural work can also examine those organically hybrid Malaysian and Singaporean cultures which have developed at the level of lived reality, but which are not acknowledged at the official level.

Extracultural theatre is defined as "theatre exchanges that are conducted along a West-East and North-South axis," the "converse of intraculturalism" (Lo and Gilbert 38). It is this form of intercultural practice which particularly exercises Bharucha, as it does not always engage with the socio-political dimension of appropriation and practice. As Lo and Gilbert point out, "extracultural theatre always begs questions about the power dynamics inherent in the economic and political location of the participating cultures, even if such questions are evaded in accounts of actual practice" (38). The definition of extracultural theatre as occurring along "West-East" and "North-South" axes is not strictly accurate in the context of Singapore and Malaysia, as Malaysian and Singaporean intercultural experiments usually draw on eastern performance traditions. The cultural exchange can thus be said to be more of an East-East phenomenon. However, the question of hierarchies of economic and political power generally remains unresolved. To some extent it is assumed that since all the exchange takes place within an eastern context, power differentials are erased. However the Asian state which appropriates other Asian cultures as part of the intercultural project, often stands in the same position as a western culture, because of (for example) superior funding, more highly developed infrastructure, and close links with 'established' theatre practitioners of the west. Often, the final product of the exchange is designed for (indeed, may have been commissioned for) consumption on the (western-dominated) international arts festival circuit. Thus, although the product has come out of the east, it is designed for consumption in the west or, in the case of Singapore and Malaysia, "westernised" consumption in the East. Malaysian and

will therefore not feature in this discussion.
Singaporean audiences for English-language theatre have, over the last twenty or thirty years, been trained in a largely western aesthetic.

In discussing these forms of theatre, I wish to examine two instances of how interculturalism has been used by practitioners in Malaysia and Singapore. I would like to stress that the companies under consideration do not confine themselves solely to intercultural work, nor are they the only companies in Malaysia and Singapore to be involved in intercultural work. However, they are among the most consistent users of interculturalism as a mode of production and performance, as well as among the most successful. This chapter therefore represents a partial and narrowly focused view of their work, and of intercultural work in Malaysia and Singapore in general. My aim in focusing on these particular productions is to examine two contrasting forms of intercultural performance – the intracultural and the extracultural – as a means of approaching the construction of alternative cultural identities.

In Malaysia and Singapore, the move towards interculturalism in the theatre could be said to reflect the authoritative production of a transnational, border-crossing ‘Asian’ identity. Former Prime Ministers Lee and Mahathir were instrumental in positing an Asian identity which challenged western political, economic and ideological hegemonies. This identity is based on a framework of ‘Asian Values’ defined as “strong family ties, filial piety, frugality, discipline, thrift, diligence, hard work, and self-sacrifice” (Alatas 114). These values were touted as being common across all Asian cultures, with the implicit suggestion that the decadent West lacks similar values. However, the construction of this Asian identity at the authoritative level is glib and superficial, erasing underlying differences and contradictions in favour of constructing a particular political identity. Despite the rhetoric of commonality inherent in the Asian values debate, the need to maintain cultural separation has not been dismantled at the national level. Intercultural theatre can move towards an identity which similarly crosses borders (racial, cultural or national), but with the potential for deeper engagement and confrontation between cultures, without the glib superficiality evident in the political construction of an Asian identity.

4 Singapore’s The Necessary Stage and Malaysia’s Instant Café Theatre Company are among some of the other groups which work with interculturalism.
Ong positions himself as an Asian, rather than a Singaporean, artist. He asks: “Can we, as artists from Asia, bring another perspective [...] to intercultural performance” (“Encounters” 126). C. J. W.-L. Wee, noting Ong’s “vision for a larger Asian culture,” argues that for Ong, “the national framework Singapore theatre worked within in the 1980s and 1990s is now inadequate and possibly parochial” (“Staging” 789). This suggests that the Singapore identity has moved beyond the purely national. I would argue, however, that in dismissing the national framework in this way, Ong is reaching for the larger Asian identity before questions about the Singapore identity have been resolved. In Scorpion, on the other hand, we see a greater effort to engage with the local before moving on to the regional: Krishen Jit evinces a deep concern with the problem of communicating across cultures and races within a specifically Malaysian context (“Scorpion Orchid Talks # 1”). Thus, while Malaysia as a political entity has begun to cross international borders, FAC’s work suggests a desire to cross internal borders first.

On Not Speaking the Other’s Language: Desdemona

Desdemona is the second part of a trilogy of loose intercultural adaptations of Shakespeare conceived by Ong. The first was the widely acclaimed and spectacular Lear (1997), which showcased a number of traditional and contemporary Asian artistes, and the third is Search: Hamlet (2002), which is notable for moving away from the more visually splendid style of Lear and Desdemona, as well as for using western participation in the performance. Desdemona stands between the celebration of Asian performance visible in Lear and the extreme abstraction that characterises Search: Hamlet. Desdemona plays with multimedia, art installations, contemporary acting styles and ancient performance styles from India and Myanmar. It takes Othello, a play by one of the western canon’s most hallowed names, as a loose organising frame for the plot, but subverts the original play by refocusing on Desdemona as an oppressed, enslaved figure. Only the Adelaide and Singapore performances of Desdemona had a ‘fixed’ form; for the other performances, some improvisation took place. For this discussion of the production I will be referring to a video recording of the presentation in Fukuoka, dated November 2, 2001; it is billed as “An Exhibition in Four Stages

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5 This is a videotaped discussion of Jit’s directorial approach to the Singapore production of Scorpion.
Connected by Video.” I will also refer to descriptions of the performances in Adelaide and Singapore by Helena Grehan and William Peterson.

A point to consider is just how ‘Singaporean’ the production is. It uses traditional art forms from India and, as Indians are one of the main races in the country, this suggests a return to ancient cultural roots as espoused by the state. However, the art forms chosen are from Kerala rather than Tamil Nadu,\(^6\) meaning that they are connected with Malayalis (a minority of Singapore’s Indian population) rather than with the majority Tamils. The performance also featured a Myanmarese puppeteer; while there are some colonial ties between Myanmar and Malaya, they are not significant. Thus the chosen Asian forms seem peripheral to modern Singapore. Does this mean that the production is not Singaporean? Does it, indeed, have to be Singaporean? Or does it reflect the subsuming of the Singapore identity into the larger Asian identity? Hata Yuki, producer of Lear, says of Ong that: “For nearly 10 years, we had watched him journey from the question of what it means to be Singaporean in a young and multiracial country to the broader question of what it means to be Asian in today’s world” (qtd. in Wee, “Staging” 798). This reinforces the suggestion that Singaporeans have grown beyond considerations of multiracialism within the country, to focus on a larger Asian identity.

However Ong Keng Sen has himself brought the relevance of his intercultural experiments to Singapore into the frame of discussion. According to Chen LiXian, he denies that “any productions created outside of Singapore automatically means it is ‘not local’ for us. ‘The Singaporean-ness is a very natural thing’” (2). In relation to Desdemona, Ong tells Jonathan Lim that he has chosen the plays adapted for this trilogy based on his interest in exploring issues which affected him as a Singaporean; where Lear focused on family and power, he decided next “to turn the spotlight on matters of race, culture and colonialism,” therefore choosing “Othello, one of the earliest intercultural plays, centred as it is around a mixed-race couple” (15).

This declaration of relevance to Singapore needs to be balanced against Ong’s assertion that he has “finished fighting Singapore identity issues” (Chen 2). How, one

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\(^6\) Kerala and Tamil Nadu are both in South India. Kerala is home to the Malayalis, while Tamils come from Tamil Nadu.
asks, does an individual finish fighting a constantly evolving issue? Has he given it up as a lost cause, or does he consider the matter settled? If he has given up fighting about Singaporean identity, why does he feel the need, in the interview with Jonathan Lim, to justify the ‘Singaporeaness’ of the play? Another article suggests that: “After several years exploring the idea of what it meant to be Singaporean, it was inevitable that Ong turned his attention to the wider issue of Asian identity” (Cairns). It was “inevitable” perhaps because it echoed the state’s attempts to ground itself as part of a larger Asian entity, rather than just being a physically small and vulnerable component of ASEAN, itself a small regional grouping. I would argue that in reaching beyond Singapore’s borders for an identity, Ong reflects authoritative constructions of identity by the state. In the end, however, he does not reinforce the state’s conception that a racially and culturally transcendent Asian identity can be unproblematically fused out of disparate elements.

The practice of Theatre Works departs from that of the state in one important aspect: the Singapore government has sought to construct pure and homogeneous cultural identities. Ong states his response to the purity of culture as propounded by the authorities: “I was saying ‘F... this pure and authentic; what will happen if we put it all together?’” (Lloyd). Thus while the state works within essentialised ‘stable’ spaces, Theatre Works experiments instead with the vocabulary of change and difference: “Theatre Works’ aesthetics projects the hybrid identity of the modern Asian and embrace [sic] the multiple realities” (www.theatreworks.org.sg/international/index.htm). However, in Desdemona, despite this challenging attitude, Ong does not actually move beyond state constructions of identity. In reference to Lear, Wee points out that although “the production critically exceeds the instrumentalist logic of culture and race as managed and homogenized by Singapore’s People’s Action Party [...] it does not subvert the state’s identity strategies” (“Staging” 773 – 774). The essentialised Singaporean racial identity remains unquestioned. However in Desdemona, by focusing so sharply on the intersections and interactions of different cultures, Ong seems to imply that the fused ‘hybrid’ Asian identity has not yet developed. His intention is to expose the clashes and moments of interaction between these various performance modes rather than to merely exoticise them.
Ong’s method in this production is best described as extracultural. Although all the cultural exchanges here take place in an East-East context, Ong, as a Singaporean from a well-funded, high-profile theatre group, is in the position of dominant appropriator of foreign cultures. Furthermore, the traditional performance modes he brings in are from India and Myanmar, countries less economically successful than Singapore, so that Singapore stands in a dominant position.

TheatreWorks was established in 1985, and has forged a reputation, both locally and internationally, for creating some innovative and challenging work. Its stated aim is to develop, support and nurture Singaporean artists and writers, as well as to develop professional theatre skills among Singaporeans (www.theatreworks.org.sg/cover/company.htm). The website declares that ultimately, the company is “dedicated to the development of contemporary arts in Singapore, and to the evolution of an Asian identity and aesthetics for the 21st century through a culture of difference” (www.theatreworks.org.sg/international/index.htm). Thus, TheatreWorks intersects with the program of many interculturalist commentators and practitioners who seek to work through and with difference, rather than to search for apparent similarities. It is through engagement with difference that there will be movement towards “an exploration of the interstice between cultures” (Lo and Gilbert 44), and thence to a production of new cultural spaces and vocabularies. Does Desdemona ultimately move towards such a space?

In Desdemona, Ong and Japanese writer Rio Kishida move even further away from Shakespeare’s original than they did with Lear, where the basic plot and characters remained identifiable. This time, they have reconfigured and reinvented the entire story, so that (as the change in title from Othello to Desdemona makes clear) the focus is on the woman trapped in her subject position. Desdemona is re-imagined as a slave to Othello, who has colonised her country and her people. Her only function, in Othello’s eyes, is to provide him with a son whom he can also name Othello, to continue the current pattern of domination. However, Othello fears Desdemona’s femaleness, and this causes him to kill her. She returns as a ghost, possessing both Othello and a male slave, transforming both into beautiful women, and making them kiss. Poisonous saliva flows into Othello’s mouth, and he is killed.
The role of Othello is taken by two performers from India, both trained in traditional forms of dance-drama: Madhu Margi is a young man trained in kutiyattam, while Maya Rao is “a modern theatre actress also trained in kathakali” (Ong, “Encounters” 127). Malaysian/Singaporean actress Claire Wong plays Desdemona. There are seven additional characters, all referred to in the program as ‘Zero;’ they include two installation artists (one from Singapore, one from Korea), an Indonesian dancer, a Singaporean actor, Korean musicians, and a traditional Myanmarese puppeteer. Aside from the different modes of live performance, Ong has included visual and installation art as central elements of the production. The set consists of simple wooden platforms, and giant video screens on which are projected a variety of images, interviews with cast members, and e-mails apparently in the process of being composed. The dialogue therefore occurs not just between different forms of stage performance, but also between different performance and audio-visual media.

The present analysis of Desdemona is based mainly on responses to the strong visual element of the performance. There is, as yet, no published script; indeed, one is, perhaps, an impossibility, as the performance relies so heavily on the interplay of visual images, spoken words, and the bodies of the actors. The actual text appears to be secondary to the images. The analysis, therefore, focuses strongly on the performance and its juxtapositionings of visual and verbal elements.

I have chosen to focus on Desdemona because it marks an effort to engage in dialogue with the process of intercultural exchange and to examine how immersion in a particular culture or tradition may affect the individual. Jonathan Lim compares Desdemona’s struggles with the struggles of intercultural artists: “Around the central notion of Desdemona trying to purge Othello’s occupation of her self and come into her own, the performers and their cultural payloads trace out constantly shifting identities” (14). Lear, by contrast, merely presented different fixed performance traditions, such as Noh and Chinese Opera, side by side.

The performances in Lear remained in their separate boxes and the production did not make the leap from monologism to dialogism (de Reuck 6). Bharucha suggests

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Although she was born and brought up in Malaysia, she has been living, studying and working in Singapore since her late teens.
that the magic of the production comes from the strong hold the traditional performers have over the performance of their own disciplines, such that they are not diluted by contact with other forms ("Consumed" 32). Desdemona was intended as a response to the lack of dialogue as well as to the glibness and exoticism of Lear. After Lear, says Ong, "I had become dissatisfied with simply directing an Asian production that juxtaposed many different languages and many different traditional expressions" ("Director's Message", Desdemona Program). Ong states that he wondered how to "encourage the intercultural process, allowing the audience to peep through the seams of the new work? How do I reveal the obsessions, the thoughts, and the lives of the Asian individuals who make up such a company?" ("Encounters" 128).

His concern here is less with the end product than with the continuing process by which the various individuals, coming from starkly different performance backgrounds, negotiate with their modern selves, with their respective performance vocabularies, and with each other, to approach the crossroads of interculturalism. Does a new culture emerge from the clash and conjoining of these different vocabularies? By changing his focus, Ong concentrates less on showcasing a fixed and finished performance product, and more on how that product actually comes to be produced.

Desdemona is premised on the notion of the difficulty of communicating and translating between cultures and individuals. Ong makes this point in an interview with Penelope Debelle: "'There is a very potent line at the beginning when she says, 'You don't speak my language and I don't speak yours,' so we took that and spliced it into the show,' Ong says. 'We have a kind of intersection of the storyline with our own process of making the narrative.'" This comment indicates an awareness of the gaps and blank spaces that exist between cultures. In Lear, these gaps were not confronted; as Yong Li Lan points out, the dissonance of styles was not apparent in that production because of Ong's talent at "smoothing over formal differences and concealing the loss of each actor's performance context by substituting the context of a relation to Shakespeare's play" (255). In Desdemona, however, differences and ruptures are highlighted. Ong uses the production to ask: "Can we have a conversation when we have different histories, different memories and different languages?" ("Synopsis", Desdemona Program). The entire production, then, is an exploration of the intricacies
of intercultural communication. It is also particularly apposite to the cultural melange of contemporary Singapore; the state discourages communication across racial groups, preferring the maintenance of authoritatively-produced categories which emphasise difference and separation. Singaporeans are constituted as having “different histories, different memories and different languages.” Is there, in the face of this essentialist discourse, space for communication; does the “third space” (Lo and Gilbert 44) exist, or can it be produced?

Ong approaches the exploration of intercultural exchange through two performance vocabularies; one is the ‘high-tech’ visual space of video installation, and the other is the codified, embodied space of stage performance. It is through his use of video art that the complexity of intercultural communication comes through most clearly. As discussed in chapter three in my discussion of Rosnah, audio-visual technology creates another dimension to the space available to theatre practitioners. Ong calls video art “the space of multiple meanings, ambiguity, documentation, and reflexivity in Desdemona” (“Encounters” 132). The simultaneous use of visual and aural effects, and the juxtaposition of different images on different screens, creates a space where the gaps between cultures are exposed and sometimes bridged. One particularly complex and layered sequence involves an interview with kutiyattam performer Madhu, overlaid with significant visual images and interwoven with translations of different languages.

We hear Madhu speaking in Malayalam (his mother tongue) about being sent, somewhat against his wishes, for kutiyattam training as a fifteen-year-old. This segues into an interview on the same subject, this time in English. Madhu ends the interview sequence by speaking in Sanskrit, the language of his performance genre, which is inaccessible to the other performers and probably the audience. As the audience listens, it simultaneously watches a video screen on which images are projected: a giant hand creates a face out of various cut-out pictures of eyes, noses, mouths, etc. This eventually turns into a picture of the masked face of a traditional kutiyattam performer. The simultaneity of the visual and audio sequences echoes the construction of Madhu as a traditional performer; his story of being pushed into performance by his father is
reinforced by the visual image of a dominant external body (the hand) playing with and deliberately creating (the picture of) the traditional masked performer.

In this sequence, while our understanding of Madhu’s personal position as a traditional performer is deepened, we are at the same time distanced from him by his use of languages such as Malayalam and Sanskrit. This tension points to the challenges of intercultural work by highlighting not only the difficulty of translating between cultures, but also the fact that each individual has access to multiple cultures. Madhu moves fairly easily between Malayalam, English and Sanskrit. Maya Rao, a contemporary actress with kathakali training, is filmed singing “Buttercup,” a western song, and then at the request of the interviewer switching effortlessly to a Malayalam song. She seems (at this simple level at least) to have no problems negotiating between different cultures and styles. However, other video images being played simultaneously challenge that ease. One image shows a mouth speaking animatedly into a telephone; out of that mouth flows a stream of wingdings. Another image shows Korean writing. The interviewer asks “What does it say?” The response is telling; it says “I don’t speak your language, and you do not speak mine.” A similar sequence occurs in the earlier scene with Madhu, when Claire Wong attempts to translate the Sanskrit which Madhu is speaking. Wong invents an English translation, but then laughingly gives up. When the interviewer demands that she translate, she refuses because “I don’t believe in translation actually. I mean it could help but at the same time it would, it could really misguide you.” These comments point to one of the fundamental problems with intercultural exchange: the problem of misappropriation, of misguided or flawed understandings of other cultures. However, by opening up these avenues of discussion, Ong forces performers and audience to confront the fact of the difficulty of communication across cultures, rather than (as the state does) avoiding confrontation by decreeing that there should be separation.

One e-mail bearing the subject heading ‘Desdemona Rehearsals’ foregrounds the potential flare-up of “tensions due to differences in working methodologies amongst the intercultural cast.” The traditional performers, for example, were confused by improvisational rehearsals, while the contemporary performers found that “the
structure for the entire play was introduced too soon.” These comments hint at the exploration of “the hyphenated third space separating and connecting peoples” (Lo and Gilbert 44) – that space along the continuum where the target culture might be produced. At what point might these two differing modes of rehearsal meet, to produce a new way of working?

Unfortunately, this question does not get answered here. While the video sequences “went much further toward suggesting what it might feel like to straddle cultures or to face cultural difference than any of the other scenes or formal elements in the production” (Peterson, “Consuming” 92 – 93), there is little by way of crossing between stage traditions. The use of technology and the ability to layer different visions of the traditional performing arts meant that it was possible, through the video art, not simply to showcase tradition, but to interrogate its position, whether in an individual’s life, or in a moment of intersection with other cultures and lives.

However, these moments of crossing are not so apparent in the live performances of the actors. Peterson says of the assembled Asian performances, whether traditional or contemporary, that: “It was as if each was contained within its own box, unable to reach out in any meaningful way to connect with artists of different cultural orientation” (“Consuming” 93). In the less formal space provided by the video segments, they can articulate their inability to translate or understand. However, the formality of the stage space and the codified demands of each performance style mean that each actor remains fixed within his or her circumscribed performance space. While the video segments allow them to challenge and question official or traditional constructions of their cultural identities, the discipline of stage performance demands that they repeat authoritatively constructed identities.

The stage vocabulary on its own is not successful in producing new dialogues. It is in the interface between old and new, traditional and ‘high-tech,’ that new meanings and dialogues emerge. An especially striking image occurs early on in the Fukuoka production, when Madhu and Maya Rao both perform at the same time, on different areas of the stage. In this segment, subtitled ‘Half of me is Him, Half of me is Her,’

*Wingdings are a pictorial font found in some word processing programs. They are meaningless as verbal language.*
Madhu appears; he is small, slight, and smiling. Maya Rao appears but she is more intense, looking wild and furious with her broad movements and her shock of loose white hair. As the two performers dance in their separate areas, Rao’s image is projected onto a screen behind Madhu. Because of the way he is positioned in relation to the screen, her image is superimposed onto his body. The strict, gestural language of Madhu’s movements contrasts with Rao’s kathakali-informed, contemporary movements, but in that moment when stage presence and video-imagery combine, we glimpse the possibilities of a shared vocabulary.9

The layering of male and female bodies and the complexities of their differing performance styles add considerable depth to the portrayal of Othello.10 While Madhu is male, his youth and his slight frame feminise him somewhat, and his strictly regimented movements discipline his physicality. Rao, by contrast, is fierce, passionate, and appears physically imposing. There is no attempt to disguise her as a man, and her generous figure signals her womanhood, yet her gestures and movements appear more ‘male’ in their aggression than do Madhu’s. Added to this is the fact that she is one of the very few women trained in the male-dominated form of kathakali. By thus confusing the issue of what exactly constitutes maleness and femaleness, Ong opens up a discursive space for the negotiation of alternative embodied identities.

The conflict between traditional and contemporary forms is also visible in the interactions between Madhu and Claire Wong, who started acting without formal training; her early experience in productions such as TheatreWorks’ Beauty World, a nostalgic musical set in 1960s Singapore, and Leow Puay Tin’s Three Children with Krishen Jit, gave her an eclectic, East-West grounding in modern performance.

Othello is constructed in this production as a coloniser and the descendant of colonisers. Desdemona says: “This country was once free, before Othello’s father’s father invaded it.” Peterson suggests that the play is “an exploration of patriarchal

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9 An interesting point to consider is that these moments are not consistent across every single performance in the production schedule. Helena Grehan, who noted the “layering of video and performer” during rehearsals in Singapore, was dismayed to find that the same effect did not carry through to the Adelaide performance because “the screens were positioned high up on the walls of the performance area” (122).

10 It is worth recalling that Ong had, from the beginning of the process, been toying with the idea of having Othello played “by a woman or by a slight, slender boy” (Ong, “Encounters” 127). Finally he combined both ideas in one performance.
oppression,” and that it could potentially function as “a kind of extended metaphor for political repression in Singapore” (“Consuming” 88). In this sense, it could intersect with Kuo Paò Kun’s allegorical Descendants, weaving its way skilfully through a potential minefield of political commentary and critique. Peterson does point out that this potential was never realised in performance; however, the Othello-Desdemona relationship does point to the tension between cultural hegemony and organic hybridity.

We could see Othello, as played by Madhu, as a representation of fixed tradition, with Wong representing contemporary flexibility and organic hybridity. Because her performance style is less codified, she is able to absorb elements of other performances – for example, she imitates the gestural language of the Myanmarese puppeteer. Her style, then, can accommodate hybridity. The confrontations between Desdemona and Othello, because they are physicalised by these two particular performers, can be read as a confrontation between rigidly defined tradition and flexible contemporary styles. In the Singapore context, we can extend Othello’s dominance over Desdemona to refer to the dominance of state-produced cultural identities over individually-produced ones. This domination of authority over individual is visible in the opening scene of the performances in Adelaide, as described by Grehan:

It was a visually stunning sequence in which panels of plywood, painted with white stripes, were spread in what seemed to be a random pattern, both on and around the performance platform. Yet when we looked at this seemingly random pattern on any of the many video screens surrounding the platform, we saw that this pattern, due to the positioning of the video camera, created a circle – a large white circle signifying O/thello or perhaps zero […]. Desdemona crawled from the side of the platform toward the front, yet when one looked at the screen at the back of the performance space, she appeared to be crawling through the circle. (121 – 122)

Peterson, discussing the same sequence in the Singapore production, suggests that the “giant ‘O’ was presumably symbolic of her entrapment by the yet-unseen Othello” (“Consuming” 85). If we read Othello as a metaphor for the dominant power of the state in producing cultural identity, then Desdemona’s entrapment within the symbolic
"O" represents the subordination of the organically hybrid, contemporary cultural self to the authority-defined cultural identity. However, in a deft moment of theatrical performativity, the stunning power of this sequence\(^\text{11}\) undermines the domination of authoritative definitions of cultural identity. Because the dilemma of those trapped between state-produced and individually-produced identities is so vividly evoked by the use of video, a strictly contemporary medium of expression, the dominance of codified and unchangeable tradition is challenged.

It is possible, however, to question whether other hegemonies are introduced, to replace the hegemony of the state. An important point to consider here is the use of subtitles to translate the non-English portions of the performance. The stage performances are the embodiment of the line quoted earlier: "I don't speak your language, and you do not speak mine;" each performer is fixed in his or her own performance language, and there is no crossover, no communication between them. Madhu, for example, speaks Sanskrit within his performance tradition; Claire Wong, being a contemporary Singaporean actor, speaks English. Theoretically, neither language is privileged, as none of the performers are asked to speak in a language that is 'foreign' to them. Ong used this same strategy in Lear, "playing with the provocative premise that no one spectator could understand all the languages used in the production" (Bharucha, "Consumed" 21). This would again highlight one of the central elements of intercultural exchange, namely the gaps between cultures. This could also be seen as an attempt to "produce the experience of difference" (Chaudhuri 196), as no single audience member is likely to have ingress into all the languages and cultures presented, and each individual must therefore at some points become aware of difference and separation.

This premise is undermined, however, by "the homogenizing and reductive use of the computerized subtitles" (Bharucha, "Consumed" 21). Certainly my viewing of the video recording was rendered easier by the insertion of subtitles in English. However, this creates a problematic point; if a particular audience's facility with English (or any other language in which the subtitles are displayed) allows that audience to 'access' the meaning of a performance even when it is in a foreign

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\(^{11}\) Grehan comments that the Adelaide audience "gasped audibly at this evocative opening sequence"
language, then can we say that this performance has produced "the experience of difference?" Does the performance then become homogenised by its translation into a single language – especially since that language (English) functions as an international form of communication? What does this do to the poignancy of such lines as "I do not speak your language, and you do not speak mine?"

Ong Keng Sen also exerted a homogenising pressure over the production in his position as ‘conceiver’ and ‘director.’ Bharucha took part in the workshops which were meant to lead into an intercultural production. He discovered, to his dismay, that “Shakespeare was a nonnegotiable factor in Ong’s agenda” and that “his inter-Asian journey had already been mapped for six years.” This meant that, regardless of what came out of the improvisations and workshops, the scene, so to speak, had already been set (“Foreign” 9 – 13). Ironically, then, Ong’s exploration of difference is heavily mediated by his own hegemonic vision as director, and he becomes the voice of authoritative performativity in this production. What the audience sees would appear to be Ong’s own vision, rather than a truly interactive, dialogic attempt to tease out the nuances of intercultural expression.

This brings us to one of the more pertinent questions in the ‘Desdemona Rehearsals’ e-mail text: “Sometimes I wonder if there is a point to this intercultural work. I mean, is it really about a bunch of Asians coming together to dialogue and generate exciting new work or is it about how efficient the director is at cultural management?” (“Email Text”, Desdemona program). As Peterson asks: “What does this exercise have to offer audiences or participants apart from an opportunity to experience a highly edited, stage-managed process?” (“Consuming” 90). Ong has not moved towards the evolution of an Asian identity. Ultimately, despite the success of the video/stage interface in Desdemona, the traditional performances functioned as Asian exotica for the western, and westernised, Asian audiences. Although forms such as kutiyattam, kathakali and Myanmarese puppetry are Asian, they remain foreign to most Asian audiences; very few in Singapore, for example, would have any access to the performance languages of these forms. Performed as they are in Desdemona, these forms are inevitably decontextualised. So what is the point of doing it? Has
TheatreWorks managed to move towards an Asian mode of expression, or to produce a hybrid Asian identity? *Desdemona* expresses the experience of separation and diversity, without at the same time moving towards a deeper sense of negotiation and exchange.

Ong has not pushed the performance to the point where dialogue and exchange take place. Traditional and contemporary styles exist side by side, but do not enter into dialogue. Interaction comes about only fleetingly, through the technical wizardry of the audio-visual equipment. It might be worthwhile in this context to take note of Bharucha’s call to deal first with the diversity of cultures within one’s own nation: “How can one presume to talk about interculturalism, I would argue, if one hasn’t begun to encounter the diverse social and ethnic communities inhabiting one’s own public space?” (*Politics 2*). Not having come to terms with the Singaporean experience of difference, Ong’s leap into the larger world of the Asian identity seems optimistically premature. Alternatively, we might see this production as Ong’s reflection of how difficult it is to negotiate between different cultures in order to constitute an Asian identity. This project cannot be as unproblematic as is implied by state rhetoric, and Ong’s approach to *Desdemona* suggests as much by underlining moments of disjuncture rather than conjuncture, difficulties in translating rather than ease of communication. In the next section, I will argue that *Scorpion* also deals with clash and disjuncture, but focuses on issues of difference and divergence within the nation, and the possibilities for overcoming them.

**Four Men and a Woman in Search of a Home: *Scorpion Orchid***

*Scorpion* is set in the 1950s, in pre-independence Singapore, at the time a part of Malaya. A fictional entity called ‘British Realty’ (a thinly disguised version of Malaya’s British colonisers) is considering pulling out of Singapore, and this is causing social and political upheaval. The city is plagued by riots, strikes and racial violence. Fernando’s play focuses on four friends, university undergraduates, called Peter, Santinathan, Guan Kheng and Sabran. Each man represents one of the four major races of Malaya: Eurasian, Indian, Chinese and Malay respectively. The play follows the disintegration of their friendship in the face of racial violence; by extension, since the

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12 I was unable to view the Kuala Lumpur production of *Scorpion Orchid*, as the videotape was sadly lost in the 2003 floods which destroyed The Actors Studio’s premises at Dataran Merdeka. For this analysis, I
four men reflect the racial make-up of the nation, Fernando portrays the possible
disintegration of the entire nation. Eventually they go their separate ways, with Peter
deciding to migrate to Australia. Caught up in their lives is Sally, a prostitute of
indeterminate race, who is brutally gang-raped by an unidentified mob and is left
disillusioned about her friendship with the four men.

Although set in Singapore, the central themes of both novel and play are
directly relevant to Malaysia. While the violence described in the text refers to riots in
Singapore in the 1950s, it could equally refer to the May 1969 riots in Malaysia, which
were also fuelled by racial and religious tensions. By basing the conflict on racial
tension, Fernando foregrounds the “ever present danger” of inter-racial strife, as noted
by Nabi Baksh: “the racial conflict created by the author is but a metaphor of the […]
very tenuous and fragile nature of these interracial relationships and the way in which
these relationships can, at a moment’s notice, be negated for no apparent reason” (52).
It is also important to note that the impetus to adapt the novel into a play came in 1993
from Malaysia: Fernando credits a New Straits Times playwriting competition with
providing the incentive for him to complete an early draft of the play (“Playwright’s
Message”, Scorpion Program, Singapore 9). Fernando wrote the play with a Malaysian
sensibility, within a Malaysian social framework. It is, therefore, valid to study
Scorpion as a Malaysian rather than a Singaporean text.

FAC makes a concerted effort to create an intracultural dialogue between
various local art and performance modes, rather than maintaining the boundaries
between them. Whereas the state posits all individuals as a homogenised mass within
specific racialised spaces, intraculturalism can challenge this view by focusing on
differences within that apparent homogeneity. I will look at the text and staging of
Scorpion as intracultural interventions which disrupt the authoritative construction of
cultural identity. Fernando states that the play “recognises our awareness of our

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13 Although Fernando does not state that he had May 1969 in mind, it is impossible to ignore the influence
these events are bound to have had on him as he wrote the novel only a few years later.
14 While the play was billed as a joint production of The Actors Studio and FAC, I will be analysing it as
primarily a product of the FAC philosophy. FAC has for a long time had a strong focus on dealing with
issues of Malaysian identity, something to which The Actors Studio has come more recently. The
dominant role played by FAC in this partnership is underlined by the prominent participation of FAC
member and composer Sunetra Fernando, and choreographer and FAC collaborator Aida Redza.
different pasts [...] reorders these pasts in a manner suitable for contemplation;” he
acknowledges that “the pasts still jangle a bit” (“Writer’s Notes”, Scorpion Program,
Kuala Lumpur). Fernando’s focus is on difference rather than homogeneity, and he is
aware of the tensions still inherent in race-relations in Malaysia. However, he is
insistent about the need for “contemplation” of these differences and tensions, in
contrast to the state’s desire to remove these matters from the arena of public
discussion and exchange.

As Bharucha notes, intracultural exchange “is, perhaps, the sharpest way of
puncturing the homogenized categories and pretensions of the multicultural state”
because “while the ‘intra’ prioritizes the interactivity and translation of diverse
cultures, the ‘multi’ upholds a notion of cohesiveness” based on authoritatively
constructed links to primordial cultural and racial identities (Politics 9). This is, of
course, the situation which prevails in Malaysia with ‘Indians’ (for example) presumed
to be a harmoniously cohesive group despite evidence of cultural, social and economic
gaps among them, as well as, sometimes, outright hostility. Based on this false
assumption of cohesiveness within the racial group, the policy of multiracialism
extrapolates further, assuming ‘tolerance’ between the various racial groups. These
assumptions, as well as the official refusal to accept challenges to them, militate
against dialogue and discussion. The dialogic element of intracultural exchange
exposes the rhetoric of multicultural cohesiveness as a sham.

Fernando’s play verbalises and embodies the racial tensions which are all too
often elided in public discourse, and challenges official constructs of multiracial
harmony. While the text represents experiences of racial tension and separation, the
strategies of performance and staging offer a glimpse of the positive potential of
intracultural dialogue to cross boundaries, thus constructing identities which are not
bound by the official discourse of multiracialism which foregrounds separation.
However, it is uncertain how successful the production is at reiterating a hybrid
‘intracultural’ identity, as the general reaction to the clash and mix of cultures
represented in the performance seems to be uncomfortable, at best. This is partly due to

Furthermore, Jit’s position at that time as the most senior and experienced director in the English-
language theatre scene in Malaysia would have meant that he, rather than Hasham, was the dominant
force in the production.
the fact that the clash of cultures is often unharmonious, creating moments of intersection which are disturbing to an audience unaccustomed to meetings between cultures. Individuals are interpellated within a system which normalises ‘tolerance’ of, rather than dialogue with, difference.

Even within the context of constructing an ‘Asian’ identity, Malaysia foregrounds the maintenance of racial difference. Milner and Johnson suggest that “only the wide-reaching concept of ‘being Asians’ can accommodate all of the major communities operating within the Malaysian nation state” (10). At the same time, however, this outward reach is countered by the need to assert specific racial identities: “The essence of Malay-ness is central to the foundation of the Malaysian nation-state” (B. L. Goh 186). Differences of race and culture cannot, then, be completely subsumed under a larger and more porous Asian identity. Malaysia has, from early on, used the Malay culture as the source from which Malaysian culture must spring. Non-Malay cultural practitioners in Malaysia, then, are less exercised by the need to search for cultural roots in the wider sphere of ‘Asia;’ rather, they feel the need to create a dialogue between Malay culture and the ‘other’ cultures, towards the development of an inclusive Malaysian cultural identity; in a brochure produced in conjunction with their twentieth anniversary in 2004, for example, FAC specifies a desire to find “new ways of performance that explore and give voice to what is Malaysian.”

Given that the whole idea of ‘Malaysianness’ is still under development and still subject to negotiation, I would argue that any attempt to ‘capture’ this identity will be largely unsuccessful. The attempt itself, in fact, would form a part of the ongoing process of negotiation and construction. As will be discussed later, the work of Scorpion music director Sunetra Fernando and choreographer Aida Redza is evidence of an attempt to express a Malaysian identity which is filtered not only through the overall vision of the directors, but also, importantly, through the experience of both Fernando and Redza as Malaysians who are not comfortable within their essentialised ‘boxes.’ However, the response of the public to these attempts suggests that they are not entirely successful in communicating an inclusive Malaysian identity. The playtext presents a world which focuses on difference. The intercultural element, through the music and movement, is brought into the production as a tentative solution, with the
performance itself suggesting strategies to overcome this insistence on difference. But given the current state of the nation, are these strategies workable?

Koh Tai Ann, writing in 1986, sees the novel as being about “alienation and exile,” but suggests that it is ultimately hopeful; she calls it “a novel of acceptance of the new society that could only become the good society and worthy home through the commitment and faith of its citizens” (“Empire’s” 46). Diamond, comparing novel and play in 2002, notes a bleak tone in the play that is not present in the novel: “In the novel, Fernando allows two of the characters to extract some meaning from their predicament, but not in the play” (135). In the intervening years between the writing of the novel and the production of the play, there has been little change or progress in the basic dilemmas described by Lloyd Fernando. Martin Spice suggests that in this play, Fernando asks “to what extent is it possible to escape the shackles of the past and of race” (“Slick”). The more pessimistic tone of the play, compared with the novel, suggests that it is not possible. The production is trapped within this dilemma, attempting to move beyond racial division but at the same time hemmed in by the entrenchment, over nearly four decades, of those divisions.

In a brochure celebrating FAC’s fifteenth anniversary in 1999, their philosophy for theatre is outlined as follows: “Five Arts Centre seeks to create theatre that is distinctly Malaysian [...] and give voice to what we feel is Malaysian.” The rhetoric here is quite different from that of TheatreWorks; the focus is entirely on the local, with none of the Singaporean group’s search for a larger ‘Asian’ identity. The FAC concept of what constitutes Malaysian theatre forms “draws strongly from Asian dance traditions and Martial Arts – like classical Malay dance, Indonesian dance, Silat, Tai Chi, etc. – and reconstructs these into new forms combining tradition and modernity, east and west, old and new” (Fifteenth Anniversary Brochure). The mix of old and new is particularly significant, as Goh Beng Lan points out: “The formation of the local, as seen from the bottom up, thus is not an attempt to leave behind old identities or to overcome the past by carving out an empty space for new identities. Rather, it is an attempt to juxtapose ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities” (186). There is an implicit recognition that the new has grown out of the old, but that there has been divergence from the path of the ‘old;’ this divergence naturally develops into the new. It is through intracultural
exchange, by working with diverse traditional and cultural forms, and attempting to produce a new cultural identity from their intersections and clashes, that FAC challenges the construction of Malaysians as racially and culturally separate beings who maintain harmony by assiduously avoiding the sensitive issue of racial and cultural difference.

In the program for Desdemona we are asked to consider, in terms of 'Asia,' if we can "have a conversation when we have different histories, different memories and different languages" ("Synopsis"). Essentially the same question is being asked in Scorpion, but specifically within the Malaysian rather than the Asian context. The question is complex; when the novel was written, the problem of a populace with divergent histories, memories and languages was very real. Most contemporary Malaysians, however, do in fact have common memories, histories and languages, although they remain fundamentally constructed as separate racialised beings. This construction was central to the formation of relationships in Krishen Jit's view. For him, the most absorbing question arising from the play was: "Can you ever know a person of another race, can you truly create a genuine bond of friendship with this person?" ("Director's Message", Scorpion Program, Singapore 6). The novel and its subsequent theatrical adaptation discuss race relations and the possibility of 'outsiders' belonging in Malaysia or Singapore. The production, however, is infused with a 1990s sensibility, in which that particular question (of belonging) is no longer so openly problematic, in part because of authoritative proscriptions against open discussions of the matter, and in part because of a slowly-growing feeling of groundedness within the nation. The awareness of racial difference does, however, continue to underline and constrain all social and political relations in the country, as pointed out by Jit, who states that for most Malaysians, "it is impossible to live [...] without thinking of race" ("Scorpion Orchid Talks # 1"). The play adds resonance to the discussion of the issue of race by placing it within a framework of intercultural performance which asks questions and suggests possibilities not present in the original text. Where the text reflects an experience of separation between the races despite superficial camaraderie, the performance brings together elements of Malaysian culture in an intentionally hybrid form which challenges the pessimism of the text, as well as questioning and
examining the state of race relations and the perceptions of racial and cultural separation and categorisation.

So sensitive is the topic of race that very few Malaysian writers attempt to engage with it. Fernando was himself unsure of treading on these almost taboo areas; he states that he hesitated "to cross cultural barriers which he has no business crossing," feeling that he should avoid writing about things if he does not know enough about them (Abishegam, "Lloyd Fernando"). Despite this hesitancy, in Scorpion he faces his subject uncompromisingly. Diamond calls Scorpion Orchid "one of the first Malaysian novels seriously and imaginatively to address race as the major social issue challenging Malaysia/Singapore" (128). Fernando commented in 1991 that "no Malaysian writer can claim to be writing with truth if he does not carry, woven into his fiction, the reality of relationships between the races, and its unavoidable undertow of threatened violence" ("Truth" 222); fifteen years after the publication of his novel, the comment remained valid. In 1995, when the play premiered in Kuala Lumpur, the issue of tension and potential violence between races was still current. In their Directors' Notes, Hasham and Jit confront this issue, asking "how can you confront the travail of racial identities and actions and in its trail avoid following their aggressive stances and posturings" (Scorpion Kuala Lumpur Program).

Despite the official, divisive policies of multiculturalism and multiracialism, Fernando remains convinced that unity at a much deeper level is possible. Jit, for example, states that "Fernando’s life, career, including his writing, is an answer to this question: how to live with people of other races" ("Scorpion Orchid Talks # 1"). Abishegam points out that "Fernando is the kind of person who writes Malaysian on a form in the space where they ask for race" ("Lloyd Fernando"). His perception of himself as 'Malaysian' rather than as 'Malaysian-Indian' points to a level of individual performativity. He is seeking to re-name himself, to reconstruct his official identity, to overcome the imposition of difference and move towards unity. The relationships in Scorpion disintegrate into a mass of distrust and resentment; and yet, there remains some sense that unity can be found, if individuals will just reach beyond their authoritatively-constituted borders of race and culture to explore the possibility of a new and different identity, unmediated by the state.
This potential is hinted at in the framing device Fernando uses in his play. *Scorpion* is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue, which are set in vaguely historical times. The prologue shows the four main characters “dressed in clothes of an earlier era, poling a boat upriver” (*Scorpion* 122). They are journeying into the unknown; a disembodied voice informs them that the area before them is ruined and dangerous, and “hidden in thick mountain mists” (*Scorpion* 122). The scene then changes to a representation of the ‘sale’ of Singapore to the British by Sultan Shah. After the scene with the British officials, Fernando moves on to the Japanese Occupation, which Peter, one of the main characters, refers to as: “Another Empire day” (*Scorpion* 123).

The various roles—the Sultan, the British representative, his Deputy—are taken on in turn by the four actors who play Sabran, Peter, Santinathan (Santi) and Guan Kheng. Although the four men are dressed in historical costume, they are also still their modern selves (this is suggested by the fact that they continue to refer to each other by their modern names, rather than by the names of the personages whom they play). While the scene goes on, the characters not immediately involved in the action comment on it; thus Sabran reacts with shock when Sultan Shah signs the agreement with the British, while Santi notes wryly that: “When it comes to bribery, you can’t hold a torch to the Brits, then or now” (*Scorpion* 122). The effect of this intersecting of eras, as well as the direct commentary from the modern characters, is to create a sense of the continuum of history. One hegemonic authority is seen to succeed another; the representation of British colonial power segues into Japanese Imperial authority, back to colonial rule. Although Fernando does not continue beyond this historical point in his text, the staging of the scene—with all the characters being played by the same actors, thus linking one historical era to another—implies that the dominance will continue beyond the departure of the British, thus also obliquely drawing the post-independence government and its policies into the frame of reference. In his Writer’s Notes in the Kuala Lumpur program, Fernando states that “our past is not culturally separable from our present. The way we look on the entire continuum makes the difference;” his inclusion of the historical frame locates contemporary race relations within a long tradition of underscoring difference. It is not, therefore, purely a

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15 Fernando’s emphasis on history as a continuum is reminiscent of Kee Thuan Chye’s approach to history in *Birch*. The plays also share a similar awareness of the centrality of materialism and economic concerns.
modern phenomenon. The emphasis on its long history suggests that the system is deeply, ineradicably entrenched within society. However, by providing external commentary from the four modern characters, Fernando allows a space for questioning of that entrenched system.

The suggestion of hegemonic authority continuing unaffected as a kind of overarching system is emphasised by the Epilogue. The four men are again poling a boat upriver, their journey as yet uncompleted. Tengku Siak, a historical figure, asks the four men if it is true that the Sultan in Singapore really has no more power. They confirm that this is true; but whereas in the prologue there was a sense that the lack of the overarching power of authority would lead to disintegration, the same is not true here. Guan Kheng tells Tengku Tanjung that despite the Sultan’s loss of authority, trade in rubber and copra remains stable, and the price of silver is increasing (Scorpion 150). The suggestion here is that ultimately, it does not matter who is ‘in charge;’ there is a power structure which remains in place regardless. This structure aims at constructing individuals in specific ways, in the furtherance of its own goals – in this case, it is suggested, economic stability and wealth.

The four men, representatives of the four major races which make up Malaysia, are shown as being continuously constructed by authoritative powers: by the British as “loyal subjects,” and by the Japanese as “Japanese children.” The colonising figures in the prologue can be read as symbols of identity-constituting authority. By showing us the bitter, scornful, mocking responses of the four men towards these figures, Fernando suggests that they desire something else, some other way of living and connecting. Their boat journey, then, represents the movement towards the discovery of this new way of living. We discover that the hinterland into which they are heading on their boat at the beginning of the play is ungoverned; they are told that the “Chiefs are all gone. Their palaces [...] have all fallen into ruin,” while beyond that flow “rapids which have taken many lives” (Scorpion 122). This could be read as a journey towards an area beyond hegemonic intervention, where authority (represented by the Chiefs) is weak. If the four men find themselves ungoverned in the sense of being unrestricted by

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to Malaysian society.
authoritative constructions of their selves, does this mean that they are heading towards danger and destruction? Can their society, thus unshackled, survive?

By the end of the play, the description of what the four men are heading towards has been somewhat modified. Tengku Siak tells the four men to “[b]e careful as you journey through our country. All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles” (Scorpion 150). Instead of focusing on the dangerous rapids mentioned in the Prologue, a sense of peace and settlement is implied by the presence of homesteads; yet this is undermined by the existence of hidden dangers in the form of “fierce crocodiles.” And yet, Fernando’s vision tends towards optimism, as suggested by the stage direction which calls for “Gamelan music for a thumping finale” (Scorpion 150). Theatre reviewer Antares refers to Sunetra Fernando’s composition for Scorpion as “avant-garde” (“Congratulations”), implying that it moves away from traditional styles of composition. The use of a traditional instrument for non-traditional music suggests a space of dialogue and exploration. The music underscores the impression Lloyd Fernando creates of a journey from social disintegration in the prologue to social integration (signalled by the talk of co-operation, and the exchange of friendly greetings) in the epilogue. That his hopeful vision cannot yet be fully realised is evident in the mention of lurking crocodiles.

Diamond compares Scorpion to the “Bildungsroman” which charts an individual’s maturation (126). My reading of the play suggests that the maturation of the four men comes only in the form of their realisation that their friendship has no solid basis. They do not mature beyond this into an awareness of how, for example, to rebuild that friendship on a firmer footing, because they remain trapped within the state-created discourse of racialisation. In the 1950s the threads connecting Malaysia and the ‘original homelands’ of those of immigrant origin were still visible. Today, however, the discourse of racialisation has largely been internalised; individuals do not, despite their increasing cultural and even racial hybridity, move easily beyond racial borders, because hybridity has not been normalised within social or authoritative discourse. The answer tentatively suggested in the epilogue (namely integration) is not

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16 The gamelan is a Malay musical instrument, traditionally associated with court performances.
explored by the characters within the main body of the play as they, like modern-day Malaysians, remain caught within divisive categories.

The possibility of intracultural/interracial exchange is examined through the interactions of Sally and the four men. In their relationships, Fernando seems to suggest that intracultural exchange leading to deeper bonds is impossible. Among the four men, any sense of harmony is tenuous, despite their professed friendship, because they all seem to work within the borders of interracial communication as instituted by the state. In other words, they are reluctant to question their positions or push their alternative opinions. Although they state their opinions, they do not move beyond authority-prescribed boundaries in their actions and reactions.

Sabran and Santi remember a time of togetherness, when all of them went to Sabran’s *kampung* for a visit. Santi says: “Oh, that time. We cycled past the *sawah*. We sang *dikir barat*. Yeah. Even then. You had me fooled” (*Scorpion* 134. Emphasis in original). Santi’s words suggest a shared cultural experience, as non-Malays and Malay join in the singing of a traditional Malay form of song; however, he undermines this by highlighting what he sees as Sabran’s insincerity. Despite appearing to be close to them, Sabran keeps at a distance. When Santi points this out Sabran’s response exposes his resentment, as a Malay, of the flow of immigrants into his country; he declares that “I feel sometimes like the Red Indians in the United States watching the tide of all of you come over us” (*Scorpion* 134). Clearly, Sabran cannot think beyond the categories which posit the Malays as the original inhabitants and all others as interlopers. His authority-influenced patterns of thought reify these categories, so that he is unable to engage with them critically and dialogically. Sabran’s silences have sprung, it would appear, from his inability to confront these issues openly. This same reluctance to confront can be seen in Santi, who glides past the newly opened space of discussion by apologising, rather than engaging with what Sabran has said. There is no dialogue or exchange, even though their quarrel briefly offers them the opportunity.

Like Sabran, Guan Kheng reiterates his racialised (Chinese) identity; he compares himself to his immigrant grandfather, who felt “a longing to be home.” Guan

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17 *Kampung* is the Malay word for village. It also connotes one’s ancestral home.

18 *Sawah* refers to rice paddies; *dikir barat* is a traditional Malay song form.
Kheng claims to “have the same longing, but it is for this land and these peoples;” yet he undermines this claim by singing “an old popular Chinese melody” and stating that he had “better be practical, hold on to what I’ve got, my heritage and my culture” (Scorpion 138). The sense of separation is deepened to the point where it seems that there can be no communication between these racialised individuals, a view echoed by Peter: “Yeah. You are Chinese, I’ll stick with the Brits, Santi can go back to Madras, and Sabran back to Kuala Pilah. All those talks we had in the hostel, those nights we stayed up and dreamed – that was stupid, wasn’t it” (Scorpion 136). Peter’s anger and despair are echoed by the violence and confusion in society, which spring from the inability, if not the refusal, to engage in active dialogue between cultures and races.

Sally is represented by Fernando and the directors of the play as a site where such dialogue might take place. She is a prostitute, on good terms with all four men. Her race is indeterminate: she could be Chinese or Malay, and she speaks both Malay and Cantonese fluently. She treats all four men equally, as friends. Daizal Samad points out that Sally’s role is deeply symbolic: “she is a place where the four friends of different races meet.” This point is echoed by Nabi Baksh, who suggests that Sally “can also be interpreted as Malaysia itself, as a symbolic representation of the country” (53). Sally symbolises the country as a site of openness and welcome to all; because she herself is racially indeterminate and because the four men are all close to her, she represents Malaya/Malaysia as a site of potential conjunction rather than disjunction. Sally rejects the idea of being labelled. When she tells a policeman her name (Salmah binte Yub), he responds with surprise: “Mean to say you’re not Chinese.” Her reply is enigmatic: “I didn’t say that” (Scorpion 144). She refuses to claim a particular racial heritage. However, all the races seem to want to possess her and put their chains on her (Scorpion 145). Rather than accept her openness and racial ambiguity, there is a desire to fix and clearly identify her, which speaks of an inability to accept racial and cultural crossings and negotiations. Finally, Sally is betrayed. Abandoned by Guan Kheng as the violence escalates, she is gang raped by a multiracial group of men. It is significant that no single race is indicted in this betrayal, and no race is omitted from it. Symbolically, the nation has been violated by all its inhabitants.
Samad’s description of Sally as “a place” where the friends meet, as well as her job as a prostitute, point to the masculinist nature of national discourse. If she is both nation waiting to be made and ‘place,’ this suggests that she is an open space upon which the men will inscribe their desires and ideologies. Because she is a prostitute, she is also characterised as a physical, sexual being openly available to the men. This characterisation repeats a thread that has been evident since the first flowering of drama writing in post-Independence Malaysia and Singapore, with women presented as passive sexual/physical beings, taking no part in the actual political business of creating a nation. In Trilogy, Siew Hua is a distant figure towards whom Reggie yearns; in Rosnah and Sandpit, women are bearers of culture, subjugated by the masculine nation. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that this vision of Sally appears in the novel, written as it was in 1976. That this vision is unproblematically repeated thirty years later is disturbing, suggesting that there has been fundamentally no change in perceptions of the place of women within the nation.

Because race is central to the play, casting is of particular interest. It seems to very subtly refute the rigid racial divisions visible in the original novel and in the text of the play. It should be noted that most of the actors involved in this production are well known in Malaysia through their work in theatre, film and television; their racial heritage would also, therefore, be fairly well known to the audience. Some of the actors reiterate the racial divisions specified in the text: Peter was played by Eurasian actor Vernon Adrian Emuang, and Keith Liu, who is Chinese, took the part of Guan Kheng. Sabran, however, was played by Zahim Albakri who, although officially labelled Malay, has an English mother. The Indian Santi was also played by a mixed-race actor, Hans Isaac. The use of mixed-race actors points to the organic hybridity of current-day Malaysia as a challenge to the essentialising stance of the state. The potential challenge represented by this sort of casting can, however, fail. In the Kuala Lumpur production, Sally was played by Samantha Schubert, who is of Chinese-Caucasian parentage and speaks with a distinctly English accent; to a Malaysian audience, sensitive to accents and to racial ‘appearance,’ she both looks and sounds more Caucasian than Asian. This unsettles Sally’s role in the play as a welcoming, racially indeterminate site of communication. Samad feels Schubert was miscast as Sally: “we never get a sense of her significant heterogeneity, nor of her symbolic premium. We are confronted by an
actress who can hardly be taken for Chinese or Malay. And while she is given, admiringly, some dialogue in Malay, she utters no Cantonese; and [...] the Malay she speaks is wooden.” Thus instead of being representative, through her racial indeterminacy, of the whole nation, Sally (as embodied by Samantha Schubert) does not represent the nation at all. The cross-racial casting does reflect the undeniable hybridity of modern Malaysia; but in this particular case, it has undermined the message inherent in Fernando’s text.

The play seems deeply pessimistic; it shows race relations to be volatile and inter-racial friendships to be fragile. The one character who is able to rise above categorisation is brutally violated, her trust destroyed. Where, then, is the maturation mentioned by Diamond? Nabi Baksh states that Fernando’s main point about interracial relationships in Malaysia is “that a true understanding and acceptance of each race by the other has yet to take place and the relationships are thus fragile, fraught with tensions which can at any moment shatter them” (53). Such understanding cannot take place until differences are openly examined and negotiated; until this takes place, each race will occupy its own separate space. Intracultural dialogue will allow for the emergence of a space of discussion and production. Although there is no public space available for discussions of race, this play provides, through the fact of its being staged, a simultaneously public and private space for the discussion of the tensions and ambiguities of race relations.

The pessimism that characterises the text is to some extent resisted by the intracultural elements that infuse the staging, demonstrating the attempt to develop connections and intersections between different cultural vocabularies and thus provide a subtext which challenges the discourse of difference and separateness. A shared cultural vocabulary has not yet developed; but what comes to the fore here is a willingness on the part of the theatre practitioners to explore and confront similarities and differences, rather than enshrining them and thus putting them beyond the scope of discussion and development. This marks a difference, in terms of intercultural staging, between Desdemona and Scorpion; in Desdemona, as pointed out by Peterson, each performer remains locked within his or her performance boundaries; the performances thus remain linked with particular races and cultures, not allowing for moments of
crossing and connection. Scorpion overturns such rigid definitions; music and dance are created by practitioners working very clearly beyond their racial and cultural 'scope,' as officially defined.

The backgrounds of music director Sunetra Fernando and choreographer Aida Redza are relevant here. While Krishen Jit experienced May 1969 and the increasing racial polarisation of society as an adult, Fernando and Redza are of a younger generation more familiar with the experience of organic hybridity. Their work represents an attempt to express that hybridity.

Fernando is Eurasian; as a musician, she works almost exclusively with the gamelan, which is viewed as a Malay court instrument. As a player and composer for the gamelan, “she has become a strong advocate for a contemporary Malaysian sound by mixing traditional and modern instruments and compositions” (Thornton and Daneels 1). She has taken a traditional Malay form of performance and, by channeling it through her own non-Malay but undeniably Malaysian consciousness, worked towards making the form expressive of a more inclusively Malaysian identity.

Redza is Malay, but grew up in Chinese-dominated Penang feeling like “an outcast” from her own racial group (Redza, “Interview”). She is strongly aware of the complexities and disharmonies ignored by official designations of identity. As a dancer and choreographer, she fights against the position that creative work “has to come from your ethnic and traditional dance background;” instead, she feels that what is important is “the essence of what you are and who you are, against the background of the growing global sharing, and parallel and divergent borrowings of the different Malaysian and Asian influences” (Redza, “Interview”). In her work, she tries to avoid the pressure to create dance which reflects only her Malay heritage, attempting instead to find a vocabulary of dance which reflects a more broadly Malaysian experience.

Sunetra Fernando’s choice of music for the production reflects the period in which the play is set, with the inclusion of several “50s-style songs” (“Music Director’s Notes”, Scorpion Program, Kuala Lumpur); she also situates the play culturally, within largely Malay boundaries, by including music she has created for “instruments from the Malay gamelan ensemble.” She thus sets time and place within specific boundaries, as
suggested by the playtext. However, she then oversteps these boundaries by including what she calls “extras,” namely “Chinese gongs, a rebab, some highly useful plastic recorders, with plentiful vocals abounding.” What this eclectic mixture of musical instruments and styles suggests is the clash and mingling of race and culture in Malaysia, reflecting both the Malaya of the 1950s and contemporary Malaysia.

Her choice of music indicates an awareness of the continuum of history as expressed in this play, of the intricate links between past and present. Her central focus as music director for this production was: “What type of music would work for a play placed at the crossroads of post-war Singapore where the literality of culture becomes blurred, and what is the musical language of our contemporary English theatre scene in KL today?” (“Music Director’s Notes”, Scorpion Program, Kuala Lumpur). In seeing the need for a music that connects the two eras, Fernando also shows her sensitivity, both to the authoritative discourse of racialisation which has long characterised social interaction in Malaysia and Singapore and to the grassroots experience of hybridity which can challenge it. Culture, as she points out, became less ‘literal,’ less easy, in the lived experience, to pin down to one particular time, style and place.

In the play, Lloyd Fernando does not approach the development of an organically hybrid identity with much optimism; what hybridity there is, in the person of Sally, is brutalised and betrayed. Sunetra Fernando’s music engages with the playwright’s concerns in a complex way. She does not merely reach for “happy hybridity” (Lo, “Beyond” 153), blending disparate instruments and musical styles in a superficial fusion. Rather, she has chosen “the path of multiplicity, of the co-mingling of sounds, as well as a path of undeliberated clashing of material, in total the experience of KL today” (“Music Director’s Notes”, Scorpion Program, Kuala Lumpur); that is, she engages with intentional hybridity. She indicates here that while there is a degree of fusion in cultures, there are also areas where the borders remain in place and only ‘clashes’ occur. Her music, therefore, does not simplify the complications inherent in the development of a Malaysian identity. The mix of Chinese, Malay and western influences in her music confronts not only the possible meeting grounds of these cultures, but also their distinct differences, and the difficulty

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19 The rebab is a stringed instrument, originally Arabic or Persian, which is now popular in many Islamic
of finding common ground and a common voice. An interesting moment occurs in the scene in which the four men and their expatriate English lecturer attend a tea dance; Spice notes that the “scene was beautifully realised as the characters swapped [sic] barbed comments in time to the strains of the waltz” (“Slick”). In this scene the four men dissociate themselves from dependence on the colonising power; that they do so in time to the waltz suggests not only that they have harnessed colonial language and discourse to their own needs, but also that they have absorbed western culture, that it is part of their organically hybrid culture.

Aida Redza’s approach to the choreography for this play suggests a non-racial, non culturally-bound way of working, which springs in part from the technical demands of choreographing for a play rather than a dance performance. Redza states that the difficulty of choreographing for a play is that it is challenging “to communicate through intricate expressive body movement which differs tremendously from the typical presentation of Dance” (“Choreographer’s Notes”, Scorpion Program, Kuala Lumpur). This suggests that with dance and movement created for plays, the focus must be on the outward expression of an inward, emotional life. Redza’s method in Scorpion was to “begin with an image, then create an improvisation working with gestures, adding active rhythmic emotion” (“Choreographer’s Notes”, Scorpion Program, Kuala Lumpur). There is an implication here that the choreographer begins from a culturally more or less neutral space, except that in Malaysia, it is virtually impossible for the individual to inhabit a neutral space. Each space is overdetermined, defined by the state and internalised by the individual. An emotional or spiritual response will, therefore, also necessarily be culturally determined.

Redza attempts to move beyond this cultural specificity by “reconstructing a contemporary dance methodology that strives to bridge a fusion between traditional disciplines and contemporary training to reaffirm her identity in performance” (www.artseeartsee.com/fivearts/playground/profiles.html). Clearly, Redza recognises that her identity is not ‘pure’ but rather involves a ‘fusion;’ there is also clear recognition of the fact that both the traditional and the modern are central elements in that training.

countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia.
In *Scorpion*, Redza’s choreography and movement work mainly involved the ensemble, which provided the crowded background to the central story of the four men and Sally by faking on the part of rioting crowds, university students, a gang of rapists, and so on. The ensemble was young and multicultural, drawing talent from all the major racial groups of Malaysia. In this, it reflected Lloyd Fernando’s careful construction of the central cast with each man representing one race, and Sally representing a racially-indeterminate site of confluence and conflict.

The multiracial nature of the ensemble meant that Redza could not realistically draw solely on one cultural tradition while developing their movements. Neither could she, given their youth, focus purely on tradition *per se*. The experience of youth in Malaysia must necessarily include a modern, partially westernised vocabulary of culture. Her work in *Scorpion* therefore draws on various Asian performance traditions, but bound within a skin of contemporary, expressionistic movement.

However, the response of reviewers to these extra-textual elements in the production was on the whole negative, suggesting one of two possibilities: either the attempt to integrate inter-cultural elements with the text was unsuccessful, or viewers are not yet ready to accept and engage with these active attempts to express a different identity. Spice expresses “reservations about the integration of the dance with the drama at the expense of other things” (“Slick”). Samad wonders if the inclusion of dance and music points to “a desperate need to be ‘innovative?’,” suggesting that these extraneous elements detract from the strengths of the play itself. Was the message of the play diluted or lessened by the possibly distracting inclusion of music and dance? In one episode, for example, Peter is tortured by shadowy figures demanding to know if he wants “to join this society or not?” (a question which recurs throughout the play, contextualised differently). His torment is not allowed to be expressed purely through the actor’s performance; dancer and FAC co-founder Marion D’Cruz appears behind Peter, performing angular and disjointed movements which have their basis in Malay dance but which tend towards the abstract and menacing. Her movements could serve to highlight Peter’s inner angst but could also serve to distract from Peter’s situation.

I would suggest that part of the problem with including intracultural elements here lies in the fact that Fernando’s play, having been developed from a novel, is
strongly textual and language-based. Where Desdemona was conceived as an organic whole incorporating text, visuals and movement, the intracultural elements in the performance of Scorpion are extra-textual, added on to an already complete text. What is more, these inclusions did not always reflect the writer’s intentions; Fernando notes that on occasion, while watching rehearsals, he would wonder “whether they were ever going to use my script at all;” when he did venture a comment, he was asked by Krishen Jit if he wanted to be director, after which he “shut up” (Abishegam, “Lloyd Fernando”). This suggests that the writer was somewhat excluded from a collaborative rehearsal process; does the production, then, represent a significant move away from the message as expressed in Fernando’s text? Further, does it imply Jit’s dominant presence as director? Did he, like Ong in Desdemona, ultimately impose his hegemonic view?

Fundamentally, there is an uneasy fit between text and performance. Fernando’s text states that racial difference is deeply, perhaps inextricably, entrenched in society. The strategies put in place by Sunetra Fernando and Aida Redza hint at the possibility of not eliding difference but of confronting and working through that difference in a culture which requires ‘tolerance’ without discussion, confrontation and understanding. The generally negative response of the reviewers to the clash and noise produced by these strategies suggests that in a public forum, they were largely ineffective. This does not, however, suggest that the work itself is without value, but that it cannot yet make an impact on a society still ruled by division.

Conclusion

Both TheatreWorks and FAC seek to actively engage with difference, but with contrasting approaches. Where TheatreWorks looks outward, FAC’s focus is within national borders. Both groups are well aware of the difficulties inherent in communicating across borders, whether racial or cultural, national or international. In both countries, these difficulties stem in large part from the policies put in place by the state – policies which legislate and categorise racial and cultural differences. As has been reiterated, the governments of both countries have, in order to control a restive, multiracial and multicultural population, inscribed these constructed racial and cultural identities on their citizens. Active differentiation has militated against communication
across borders, and potential misunderstandings and violence have thus been avoided or, at least, constrained; miscommunications cannot occur, because communication is not allowed to occur. Decades of authoritative inscription have led to the internalisation of these categories by the majority of the population. Individuals become responsible for their own interpellation within this discourse when they respond to the names they have been given, and the state project of social control is thus extended through social acceptance of constructed identities.

However, the two performances under consideration here disrupt state projects to some extent, by actively confronting difference. In both productions, the focus is on clashes and disharmonies rather than on fusion and harmony. There is recognition, on the part of the practitioners involved, that border crossings are deeply problematic. What these productions provide is an experience of difference, through the use of unfamiliar languages, sounds, movements. They thus open a site of discussion where none exists in the state (unless it is heavily regulated). They focus on intentionally hybrid possibilities, but avoid the easy hybridity of superficial fusion by reaching towards deeper engagement and understanding.

Ong's production seems to suggest that such engagement is still out of reach; he focuses on moments of non-communication. Jit, Hasham, Sunetra Fernando and Redza, however, actively push for moments when different cultural vocabularies can come together, even if these moments are unharmonious and not always understood or well received. It is only along the continuum between different cultures that a new space of intercultural communication can come into being. Similarly, it is only by consciously engaging with spaces of difference and similarity in the essentialised racial and cultural identities of Malaysia and Singapore that a hybrid, non-racialised Malaysian or Singaporean identity can be constituted. Neither of the productions discussed in this chapter has come to that point, but by showing their awareness of the need for such an identity, they challenge institutionalised acceptance of essentialised, separated identities.

The context within which TheatreWorks and FAC work has resonances for intercultural performance in general. As noted earlier, intercultural performance is a western-dominated field; it carries with it associations of cultural hegemony,
domination, and appropriation. What groups such as TheatreWorks and FAC can do is to re-appropriate intercultural performance, and to shift the ground of practice away from western appropriation to eastern/Asian exchange. However, the work studied here only represents the beginning of such possibilities. These beginnings have, however, set a foundation on which the next generation of theatre practitioners might yet build something new.
Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to present the English-language theatres of Malaysia and Singapore as sites for the production of voices and identities which challenge and negotiate with state constructions of identity. They allow subaltern voices to be heard, and provide spaces where the marginal and alternative can be embodied, that is, made visible and audible in an environment which generally suppresses expressions of difference. These theatres have the potential to performatively construct and reiterate identities which disrupt official discourses. However, while the theatre is a space which can escape or evade authoritative control, it can also be co-opted towards the reification of authoritative constructs. The theatre can thus play an ambiguous role in relation to state discourse.

My focus in this thesis has been on the theatre’s disruptive potential, as well as its power to present alternative identities in a visible, embodied way. It challenges authoritative constructions of identity with alternative performativities. However, my arguments have also taken account of the imbrication of theatre practitioners within authoritative policies and practices. The question remains: has the theatre effectively constructed identities which confront and question officially constituted identities, and have these disruptive identities been normalised within social discourse? In attempting to answer these questions, the thesis has traced several themes, such as racial identity, hybridity, and masculinist and feminist discourses.

Given that the citizens of Malaysia and Singapore are primarily identified by their officially inscribed race, the central focus throughout this thesis has been on racial identity. However, the presentation of race has not been a straightforward matter of simply refuting the relevance of racial classification to Malaysian and Singaporean society. Writing and staging strategies can show a level of resistance to the essentialising and centralising of race. And yet the consistency with which race is thematically foregrounded in the English-language theatre indicates the difficulty of moving away from the reality of labels and categories which have been internalised and largely normalised.
The plays studied in this thesis demonstrate the centrality of race to daily existence in Malaysia and Singapore. *The Singapore Trilogy* does not overtly mention race, but Yeo unconsciously creates a Chinese-dominated world in his plays, reflecting Chinese dominance in Singapore and his unproblematic acceptance of it. *Lela Mayang* as a text portrays a Malay world, but subverts that singularity by including representation from the margins in the performance. *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* and *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch* do not foreground racial categorisation; they portray groups of young Singaporeans and Malaysians who seem to relate on non-racial grounds. However, this tentative suggestion of racial transcendence is quashed by the fact that *Rosnah* and *The Sandpit: Womenesis*, which are roughly contemporaneous with *Descendants* and *Birch*, reaffirm the centrality of race to identity formation in Singapore and Malaysia. Both plays grapple with the issue of cultural hybridity, but the characters remain enclosed within essentialised racial borders. *Mergers and Accusations* and *Family* centralise gender rather than race; however the Five Arts Centre production of *Family* chose to engage with issues of race by bringing 'other' voices into the Chinese world of the Yang family, through the inclusion of parallel texts by non-Chinese writers. The need to do this suggests that one racial voice cannot speak for another. *Desdemona* and *Scorpion Orchid* seek to engage in dialogue across racial and cultural borders, but their attempts are not wholly successful.

The overarching, racially-transcendent Singaporean or Malaysian identity has not yet been developed. It can be argued that in practical, lived terms such an identity does exist – racial hybridity is becoming increasingly common, and it is unlikely that anyone practices a ‘pure’ form of any culture. However, the state discourse of racialisation remains dominant and has been internalised, to the extent that the vocabulary of racial categorisation subsumes the lived experience of hybridity.

The English-language theatre reflects this tension between essentialisation and hybridity. Importantly, however, the theatre also enters into dialogue with these central preoccupations. The plays studied here not only question and disrupt the authoritative stance, they can also suggest differing approaches. Thus *The Singapore Trilogy* questions the PAP’s political hegemony and suggests that the Opposition does make valid points, while *Lela* stages an alternative to the essentialised view of the national
culture. *Descendants* and *Birch* question the existence of a culturally-united national identity, demanding that individuals instead confront their greed and materialism. *Rosnah* and *Sandpit* actively question the effect of the strict demarcation of essentialised racial and cultural boundaries on hybrid individuals. *Mergers* and *Family* undermine patriarchal constructions of gender identity, and posit the formation of non-patriarchal family units, thus also subtly challenging the patriarchal nature of the state. *Desdemona* and *Scorpion* challenge state constructions of culture and race as 'pure,' using intercultural performance as a means of opening up new spaces of dialogue between cultures.

An interesting point to note is that despite the attempts of the writers and directors to question and disrupt authoritatively-produced racial and cultural identities, little is done to disrupt conventional understandings of gender identities. The only plays which present unconventional and challenging gender identities, whether male or female, are *Mergers* and *Family*. Significantly, these are also the only two plays studied here which were written by women. All the other plays reiterate the patriarchal construction of women as passive, subjugated bearers of culture, while it is the men who create the nation as a political and economic entity.

By engaging with matters of difference and alterity in a public venue, the theatre is able to open up a space of discursive failure, where authoritative constitutions of identity begin to be questioned. Butler has argued that constituting acts constitute identity "as a compelling illusion, an object of belief" ("Performative" 271). Once that belief is shaken, the illusion shattered, the constituted identity no longer has the power to compel particular modes of behaviour from an individual. However, while the theatre does have this power, I would argue that in the plays studied in this thesis, this disruptive power has not been wholly successful. As has been shown, moves away from essentialisation and towards hybridity are often disrupted by authoritative intervention, or by social pressure. The innovative cultural experimentation visible in *Lela*, for example, was rendered almost unworkable by the racial polarisation and official policies of racial categorisation that came in the wake of May 1969. In *Rosnah*, the title character is unable to break out of her strict racial/cultural box; she has internalised state inscriptions of racial and cultural purity to such a degree that confronting her
hybridity leads her to personal fragmentation. In Desdemona and Scorpion, the dialogue between differing cultural forms is uneasy, suggesting both the difficulty of working across cultures and the discomfort of Malaysians and Singaporeans with identities which deliberately and visibly cross cultural and racial borders. These plays represent a tentative beginning in the process of renegotiating identities.

It should be noted that the plays dealt with in this thesis are, by and large, the work of the first three generations of theatre practitioners to emerge in Singapore and Malaysia since independence. Yeo, Dorall, Lee and Das represent the first generation; Maniam, Kee, and Leow represent the second, with Jit and Kuo straddling the two generations. Sharma, Wong and Ong are of the third generation. It would be interesting to look at the work of the next generation in these two countries, to see how much further these themes have been taken. Some names to be considered are Alfian Sa’at and Chong Tze Chien, both from Singapore, and Jit Murad and Huzir Sulaiman from Malaysia.

The previous generations have created a legacy of challenging and innovative work, and have made a conscious effort to transmit skills and expertise to younger theatre workers. In Singapore, Kuo’s Theatre Training and Research Programme, the work done by The Necessary Stage in schools and communities, and the playwriting workshops held by TheatreWorks are among just a few of the means of transmitting these skills. In Malaysia, the Actors Studio Academy, Dramalab and Five Arts Centre also provide training in a wide range of theatre skills. Youth theatre is also a forum that is gaining ground; it would be exciting to see what this youngest generation, trained from a fairly early age in the subversive and expressive potential of the theatre, might be able to do.

As mentioned in the introduction, both Austin and Butler consider the theatre to be ineffective; utterances spoken on stage cannot be performative, they assert, because they do not compel belief and govern everyday life. Although the plays studied in this thesis have not been completely successful in normalising the disruptive, alternative identities they embody on stage, they do demonstrate an enormous potential to performatively construct challenging, hybrid identities.
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