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PARAMETERS OF MALAYSIAN IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF LLOYD FERNANDO AND K S MANIAM

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English is not the officially preferred language of public discourse in Malaysia. Since the passing of the National Language Act in 1967, that privileged status goes to Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, the language of the politically dominant Malay community. Bahasa Malaysia is, of course, the linguistic expression of an ethnic Malay nationalism that defines Malaysia in exclusive Malay cultural terms. Poet Ee Tiang Hong observed more than a decade ago that “the picture of Malaysia today is one of Malay hegemony in every major sphere of life.”(1) It is also the case that the national literature of Malaysia is officially defined as Malay literature, with creative writing in the other languages spoken in Malaysia being termed merely “sectional literature.” Because of their choice of a literary medium, writers in the other languages, including English, are thereby effectively denied official recognition, public acclaim, and even convenient outlets for publication in their country of birth and citizenship. For non-Malay writers, the personal consequence of Malay linguistic ascendancy has been a profound experience of marginalisation and feelings of alienation, even a sense of exile, in their own land. Not surprisingly, several of the more conspicuous Malaysian English-language writers have migrated over time.

Still, there has been, and continues to be, a vibrant and tenacious stream of literature in Malaysia that is written in English and is somehow being published. There are valid reasons for this persistence, reasons that are inherent in Malaysia’s modern history as a former British colony and now independent state to which both immigrant communities and former colonial ruler have made vital contributions. English language writing in Malaysia may have suffered culturally and politically because of its association with former British colonial rule. It may well, too, have prompted what Fernando (2) has termed “detrribalization anxiety” among its

practitioners. Yet it has also benefited from the relative freedom, potentiality and adaptability of the language and its contemporary cosmopolitanism. This renders current English a source of enrichment. Past hang-ups can blinker the dynamic and complex nature of reality. It is obviously crucial that literature be nurtured that reflects the nation of Malaysia in holistic rather than communal terms.

Truly there has proved to be a variant of English for every linguistic occasion and every purpose, including the sweep of information technology, as well as the imperatives of cross-cultural communication in the polyglot, hybrid society that is contemporary Malaysia. Just like Spanish has done in South America, English can reflect Malaysia's context and its distinctive, heterogeneous, multi-ethnic tradition. Within the house of literature, there are many mansions. Back in 1966, Han Suyin, herself resident of Malaysia for a time, furnished an inclusive definition of Malaysian literature as "those writings which by emotion, identification, description, social context and involvement relate to Malaysia.... whether written in Malay, Chinese, Tamil or English."⁽³⁾ Writers like K S Maniam and Lloyd Fernando would undoubtedly welcome such inclusiveness because it implies a broad view of Malaysian experience.

Since initial independence in 1957, Malaysia has produced a variety of poets, playwrights, and novelists who have chosen to write and publish in the English language, and who have attained both national and international recognition. Names like Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong, Lee Kok Liang, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim come readily to mind all of whom have been discussed critically and extensively elsewhere. This paper focuses on the works of two leading Malaysian novelists, Lloyd Fernando and K S Maniam, of Eurasian and Tamil descent respectively. Both of these men have published two novels to date, and both have developed themes pertinent to the identity of the land in which they live, and the peoples who live there, those whom the inimitable Dennis Bloodworth once termed the "mythical Malaysians."⁽⁴⁾ The novels by Fernando and Maniam confirm that the parameters of Malaysian identity were, and remain, communally defined and exclusionist. In the contemporary world of nation-states, not all colonization is externally inspired.

Fragile Foundations in *Scorpion Orchid* (1976)

Both thematically and structurally, *Scorpion Orchid* is a brave book in which Lloyd Fernando has crafted an imaginative, historically well informed exploration of the meaning of independence for British Malaya, then

including Singapore. His theme is nothing less than the fragility of a multiracial society as the departure of British colonial rule looms. This colonial system is archly but aptly dubbed 'British Realty', reflecting the congenial framework that colonial 'law and order' provided for the entry and exit of British capital into the Malay peninsula from 1786 onwards. Structurally, Fernando employs the device of archival flashback, interspersing his narrative of the 1950s with extracts from some of the classic historical descriptions of the Malay world from earlier centuries, such as the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) and the *Hikayat Abdullah* (Story of Abdullah). This device furnishes the reader with some temporal perspective and a sense of continuity. Physically, Malaysia is a land of great natural beauty and cultural vitality, capable of inspiring feelings of affection amongst both inhabitants and visitors, and, as Fernando's concluding paragraphs attest, even amongst those who have once left it in despair at its political absurdities. Superbly guided as *Scorpion Orchid* is by local Malaysian place and time, there is no doubt that Fernando intends this novel to make a contribution to Malaysian writing, as much, or even more than, English literature.

The main characters of the novel are four young men, one each from the main ethnic communities. Sabran is Malay, Guan Kheng is Chinese, Santinathan is Indian, and Peter D'Almeida is Eurasian. Higher education and its associated privileges bind them. All of them are former schoolmates and now undergraduate students at the University of Malaya in Singapore. Within a stratified colonial society, they also exhibit playful and irreverent attitudes to those they perceive as below and above them.

However, from the very first chapter, it becomes clear that even common membership of a student body is temporary and tenuous, and a shallow basis for lasting association. The family of the young Indian man, Santinathan, is shown packing up on the eve of their departure from Singapore back to India, the land of their ancestors. It is intended that Santinathan will join them later on the successful completion of his university studies, but Santinathan's expulsion from the university for disruptive and disrespectful behavior. He must now find laboring work, and is reduced a marginal, desperate existence in the back alleys of Singapore. This separation from his former university mates matters less, though, as the industrial and political situation around them descends into anarchy and chaos fomented by radical communism as the famed colonial "law and order" is about to be withdrawn. This context of chaos means more to the narrative than some actually rather thin, if recognizably human, characterization.

In his quest for a Malayan focus in the novel, the author also attempts to create two archetypal, transcendent characters to whom the others can relate, whatever their ethnic affinities. The first is a holy man, a visionary and soothsayer who goes by the name of Tok Said. Significantly, the reader never actually encounters Tok Said first-hand, but only by hearsay from out of the mouths of other characters who claim to have met him. The reader can never be quite sure. The problem is compounded when each of the characters perceives Tok Said quite differently. To Santinathan, he is a Malay *bomoh*. To Guan Kheng, visiting Malacca, he becomes an elderly Eurasian named Senor Francisco Xavier Entalban. To the Malay, Sabran, Tok Said is a Chinese geomancer. In Tok Said, the young men see what they want to see, and the truth about this ostensibly consensual figure proves elusive. The other intentionally integrative personality is the prostitute first introduced as Sally, who serves in turn to accommodate the physical needs of most of the main characters, again irrespective of ethnicity. Yet, Sally, too, is an ambiguous character. She is alternatively called 'Sally Yu' or 'Salmah binte Yub', so she could be of either Chinese or Malay descent, a distinction of fundamental significance in Malaysia. Her role in the narrative is basic and therapeutic, rather than inspirational or challenging. She says, "Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, I give them rest."⁽⁵⁾ Like the ethereal Tok Said, Sally or Salmah is not the stuff of which nations are constructed.

So the seeds of division prove deeper than the immediate ties of friendship. Threatened by militant Chinese mobs in Singapore, Sabran symbolically decides to move north to Malaya itself. Threatened by the imposition of Malay as national and official language, Peter D'Almeida resolves to leave the colony for a better life in Australia, though he actually ends up in wintry England, ironically soon pining for his equatorial homeland in Malaya. Guan Kheng and Santinathan remain in solitary circumstances in Singapore, but, influenced by the departure of his family, Santinathan is destined, sooner or later, to return to India. It is in fact, the Indian contribution to Malaya/Malaysia that informs K S Maniam's first literary portrayal of his homeland.

Tamil Ethnicity in *The Return* (1981)

Malaya became Malaysia in September 1963, and relinquished Singapore less than two years later in August 1965. With the passage of the National Language Act in 1967, the pressures for a monocultural Malayo-Muslim state intensified. Yet writers from the other communities continued to be heard. Heinemann Asia published K S

Maniam's first novel, *The Return*, in 1981. Its plot centres on a young, impressionable Malaysian Indian who comes back from further education in Britain to confront the dual realities of the Malaysian landscape and his Indian extended family. It turns out that these two realities are barely compatible, for the principal characters spend most of the novel in a futile attempt over half a century to put down South Indian roots in Malaysian soil. Indeed, the early chapters constitute a hymn to Tamil ethnicity. Maniam's evocation of a Tamil family's distant but glamorous past, on a sub-continent the narrator had never then seen, provides dramatic, ironic contrast to the grim conditions where Malaysia's Tamils actually lived on the rubber estates near Bedong in Kedah. As at least one other critic has pointed out, the text is so replete with Indian symbols and characters that readers could be forgiven for inferring that British Malaya of the 1950s was a mostly Indian preserve. There are some scattered references to Chinese shopkeepers, but really none of consequence to the Malays who then made up half of the population of the peninsula. Instead, as Margaret Yong observes, the work "vibrates with the emotional associations of a subject intimately understood."⁽⁶⁾ Maniam shows how Hindu deities like Siva and Saraswathi, and Hindu festivals like Ponggal, Thaipusam and Deepavali, helped to transform and transcend remote plantation existence for an occasional day at a time. They also served to bring together the South Indian population, and help assert its identity as an ethnic minority.

There is no more sympathetic or substantive symbolization of an Indian past than in the character based upon Maniam's own grandmother, the woman who became known as Periathai, or Big Mother. She was the peddler who had walked with firm purpose and a hump in her back, so symbolic of endurance that eventually osmosed into a terminal tumour. For the youthful Ravi, the narrator based roughly on Maniam himself, the determined, self-reliant Periathai took on mythical proportions. The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of narrative as "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history."⁽⁷⁾ Like V S Naipaul's grandmother in Trinidad, Periathai's "India had remained intact," and "her idea of the world had remained whole."⁽⁸⁾ Maniam himself says that the character of Periathai represents "the spiritual strength and vision of a people."⁽⁹⁾ Bravely, she tells Ravi never to let anything break his spirit, but she also fails to establish legal ownership of the piece of earth she occupies in Malaya, for she had 'no papers, only a vague belief, and a dubious loyalty.'⁽¹⁰⁾ She did, however, leave an industrious son, Naina, Ravi's father, who earned most of his living from the hospital laundry in Bedong, although some members of the family also worked in the nearby estates.

After the death of his grandmother, Ravi determines to leave the harsh, isolated circumstances of Bedong. It is formal education that affords him the vehicle for escape, specifically the English-medium school in Sungai Petani, with its colonial architecture, efficient Chinese clerks, silent rooms, rows of desks, square-lined exercise books, and ubiquitous pictures of daffodils. Above all, though, the English primary school was the domain of Miss Nancy, she of the intoxicatingly fair complexion, raven hair, frilled skirts, starched blouse, obsession with bodily hygiene, and a loud, commanding voice. Miss Nancy is a wondrous and dangerously comic creation. Her schoolroom centred the malleable Ravi's life. Order, cleanliness, and individuality became his defining characteristics. For Ravi, the worlds of school and home began to lurch dramatically apart, and he came to view his Indian domesticity with disdain. Thus, when his father, Naina, eventually agreed to Ravi's request for a toothbrush, the Chinese shopkeeper cannily observed that Ravi would be "a real Englishman now."(11) Both Naina's economic success in the laundry business, and Ravi's educational achievements, challenge the rigid operation of the colonial and caste system amongst the Tamil community in Bedong. When thrashed by the Tamil estate supervisor for talking with some visiting English children, Ravi resolved in one cathartic moment to escape from Bedong: "I turned away from the God who ruled my people."(12)

It was his father's considerable success in the laundry business, the additional work of his mother and step-mother on Riverside Estate, as well as his own success in secondary school that eventually made this escape from Bedong, Kedah, and the Malay peninsula possible. Rather than remaining just "a dhobi's son" who "could never dream of being more"(13), Ravi obtained a rare scholarship from the Indian High Commission to finish school and undertake two years of teacher-training in England. Sadly, though, this very achievement meant a break with his parents as well. As yet, Ravi did not share his father's desperate urge to "drive some stake into the country,"(14) nor did he comprehend this father's final change of appearance, symbolic residence on the jungle fringes, or tragic assertion of dignity through self-immolation by fire. It was really only in death, as his ashes were scattered in the river, that Naina became a part of Malaysia. The price for his family, though, was what V S Naipaul has elsewhere aptly called "the disintegration of our private Hindu world."(15)

Communalism, the situation where an individual's ultimate loyalty and affection is given to his or her ethnic group, permeates the Tamil family at the heart of *The Return*. On one hand, it helped provide personal identity and cultural vitality in a new land, at least for a while until memory fades, and nostalgia and a mournful sense of cultural loss take over. On the other hand, an aspect of Tamil communalism such as caste restrained the upward

social mobility, occupational choice, and material success that the new circumstances of Malaya/Malaysia warranted and encouraged. For every one Ravi who got away, many more were left behind to languish in what Maniam himself called an environment of “the estate houses, the rubber trees and the red, laterite road that led away from the main, tar road into remoteness.”(16) As the agonized Naina tells his son, Ravi:

“Can’t you see? We can make all the money, get all the learning.

But these are useless if our house pillars don’t sink into the clay

of the land.” (17)

A Dream Shattered: *Green is the Colour* (1993)

Communalism is seen to contain both strengths and weaknesses in *The Return*. Maniam himself has rejected “communal or cultural inbreeding”(18) in literature, but it is not, of course, as easy as that, and Lloyd Fernando’s second novel highlights the limitations of multiracialism as a guiding ideology for Malaysia. *Green is the Colour* is set in Malaysia some time after the racial riots of 13 May, 1969. In the national capital, Malay civil servants behave as though nothing untoward has happened. They mouth neo-Confucian platitudes about loyalty and patriotism, and ritualistically denounce Western influence on Malaysian society. In fact, the country is awash in disruption, disorder, and violence. Cars are dented, glass is splintered, and Hindu shrines are desecrated. There are curfews, roadblocks, and military checkpoints. Armed militia roam the landscape, assaulting and torturing the enemies of powerful politicians and Islamic fundamentalism.

Resonances of *Scorpion Orchid* permeate Lloyd Fernando’s second novel. Again, Fernando is superb on the context of Malaysian place and time. His love of the physical landscape verges on pantheism, emphasizing the seductive appeal of the red hibiscus and the *angsana* tree, the cool, flowing water of the rivers, the green padi plants of the sawah, and the taste of fruits such as mangosteens, bananas, rambutans, and durians. There is also the easy familiarity with an urban academic milieu.

The four main characters are drawn from an upper-class multiracial elite, held together by the bonds of school, university, professional careers, and the English language. All of them are doomed. There is ‘Harry’ Dahlan, an Anglicised Malay lawyer, activist, and social critic notorious for his unconventional views and outspoken

behaviour. There is Yun Ming, the Malay-speaking, idealistic civil servant who works for the Department of Unity, but finds very little of it outside Kuala Lumpur. There is Sara (short for Siti Sara Hanafiah), the beautiful academic sociologist trapped in a loveless marriage to a fundamentalist convert. There is Gita, another academic sociologist and Sara's best friend, who marries Harry Dahlan only to see him arrested and brutally tortured for his beliefs.

There is much greater depth of characterization in Fernando's second novel. Sara is ostensibly the key integrative personality for the plot. Most of the male characters lust after her, including the sinister, devious, power-mad Panglima, a senior officer in the Department of Unity whose ethnic origins are shrouded in mystery and ambiguity. He could be Thai, or Cambodian, or Indian or Eurasian, but passes for Malay. It is the ill-fated, cross-cultural relationship between Sara and Yun Ming which centres the novel. Their passion and intensity cannot prevent their arrest by Muslim authorities in a country, which has descended into a scenario of horror and anarchy worthy of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Yun Ming is savagely beaten and Sara raped and assaulted by the Panglima to the extent that, at the end of the book, she cannot bear to contemplate male company ever again.

Ethnicity, inflamed by Islamic puritanism, matters most in the end. Yun Ming might once have told his superiors that Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent had to disregard their cultural roots and adopt one national way of doing things, but even the obliging Yun Ming balked at asserting that all Malaysians should follow the same religion. (19) Sara comes closest to the truth when she reflects in calmer times: -

“Nobody could get May sixty-nine right, she thought. It was hopeless
to pretend you could be objective about it. ...the wound beneath
continued to run pus.” (20)

An Elusive Identity: *In A Far Country* (1993)

An ambitious work in thematic terms, Maniam's second novel takes place on the broad canvas of the various communities of independent Malaysia. Because of his cosmopolitan experience, Maniam rejects a concept of

culture as no more than a "defensive little patch" or "protective enclosure." (21) It is also technically an intricate and difficult work. Public and private, past and present, dream and consciousness, present and flashback, light and dark variously succeed each other in a whirl of juxtaposition. With its collection of notes, letters, memories, and meditations, *In A Far Country* tries to depart from the genre of social realism, although it is still the case that some of its best episodes contain dense description. Like R K Narayan and his Malgudi, William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, Thomas Hardy and Wessex, even V S Naipaul and Trinidad, Maniam writes most convincingly about the Kedah he knows so well as complete insider.

The principal character and narrator, Rajan, is a Malaysian Indian who has come out of a remote estate world and achieved success in business. Rajan is defined as a "house and property owner, with a solid bank account"(22), but he also has a decidedly reflective bent. At the outset of the novel, he is undergoing a kind of mid-life, mid-career crisis, shut up in a favorite room in his house, obsessed with his inner self, shunning both food and the company of his family, yearning for some transcendental light above and beyond mundane communal and material preoccupations. Rajan is really most convincing when he reminisces over the plantation estate of his boyhood. His memories are overwhelmingly negative.

One of eight children, Rajan recalls a permanently aggrieved mother and a father sodden with toddy for most of the days and nights, a grim picture of "limp helplessness."(23) Rajan believes that the only significant event in his father's entire life was his original journey from India to Malaysia, but even then there had been little heroism in that particular immigrant experience. As the father related:

"The ship we came in was crowded and foul. The hulls were rusted. When I drank water from the taps there was only the taste of rust. And the human dung - all over the place. The men not even closing the door. The door too rusted to be closed. The women with just the saris over their thighs, to hide their shame. Sometimes no water even to wash, to flush away the human filth."(24)

Once in Kedah, the father feels trapped, helpless, impotent, condemned. Like other familiar Maniam characters, he cannot find a home in this new land.

“... I thought I would find heaven. But people can be wrong. A man can be wrong. The price has to be paid. I am paying it with blood. With all this suffering ...Why must there be suffering? We suffered there in India. Now there is only suffering. No escape like the last time.” (25)

The rubber estates themselves were manifestly nothing like the fabulous mythological kingdoms uncovered by earlier Indian explorers in prehistoric times across the Bay of Bengal. Even by the age of 13, Rajan yearns to escape the “the bareness and harshness of my surroundings.”(26) Not even wonderfully mysterious rituals like Deepavali, or stubborn, captivating characters like Mani the goat and Muniandy the smoke-house attendant, can dampen Rajan’s resolve to leave, firstly by voracious reading, and then through formal schooling.

In his adult years, Rajan meets up with Lee Shin, a Chinese business colleague, and decides to make a detailed, sociological-type “study” of him. Lee Shin turns out to be a private, cultivated person of calligraphy, banners, flute, and decorated dragons, who also is doomed to die after a failed quest to transplant his Chinese culture into Malaysian soil. “He just wanted to be left alone,” Rajan reflects wistfully on the futility of Lee Shin's ultimate goal. (27) Still trying to comprehend the meaning of Malaysia, Rajan turns to the rural Malay, Zulkifli, who uses the image of the tiger to convince him of the Malay community's traditional, mystical attitude to the landscape. However, despite several forays into the deepest *ulu*, Rajan doesn't actually come face-to-face with this tiger, and in fact runs away from the prospect. Zulkifli gently reminds him, “You don't have ancestors here.”(28) Significantly, Maniam employs the natural symbolism of the tiger to signify the essence of the Malay community, rather than the seemingly more obvious symbolism of Islam, which is not mentioned in the text at all. Yet Islam is a fundamental point of entry into contemporary Malay culture in Malaysia.

Malaysian identity, then, remains elusive in any concrete, programmatic, even human terms. Communal habits, reflects Rajan, “build up walls...(and) prevent us from knowing each other, knowing ourselves.”(29) If, as

Maniam himself affirms, "the problem for the Malaysian writer is in making the crossover to the other cultures, to get to know better the people of other races to be able to write about them,"(30) then that problem remains, after all the effort of *In A Far Country*. Instead, the novel offers another return to Hindu verities in the quest for a mystical light that is beyond and above all earthly existence and travail. Again Rajan asserts:

"I see the light. It is the light of pure living. It is there shining all around and into me. There is no ego, no self-interest, no loyalty to all the people I've known; only the desire to contain that light within me and to take it out into the world. For it is the light of intelligence, not the darkness of the limited mind." (31)

Like a key character, Naina, in *The Return*, Rajan has begun to turn from worldly success to spiritual enlightenment, though not, he hopes, as a reclusive form of escapism. Within this context, concepts such as national identity seem unnecessary, even irrelevant. In fact, the transcendental theme of darkness into light is there from the very first chapter of *In A Far Country*, when the middle-aged Rajan goes into a bright room to begin his self-analysis. It is likewise significant that, at the end of the novel, Rajan has managed to achieve a reconciliation with his spouse, indicative of the efficacy of human action on an individual, microcosmic level as contrasted with a broader social or national realm.

The plot of the novel, too, verges on diffusion, with significant repetition and divergence, even into barely disguised political commentary. The latter affords a rare instance of bawdy humour as political satire in the text, when the stubborn goat, Mani, reappears behind the podium on which visiting government ministers sit and speak, and irreverently neighs and passes wind with hilarious results.

Some Concluding Comparisons

Culture, Edward Said reminds us, “is not monolithic,” nor is it the “exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women.” (32) This paper has given consideration to two of those Malaysian authors termed by Wong Phui Nam as “still recalcitrants who persist in writing in English.”(33) The fictional works of Fernando and Maniam offer testimony to the persistence of substantial minority cultures that are different from the Malaysia as defined by ethnic Malay nationalism.

Both Fernando and Maniam share a deep and profound affection for Malaysia, which is, of course, the land of their birth and upbringing. They both yearn for a recognition of cultural pluralism that is more than political lip-service, and for a larger view of Malaysia that is integrative rather than assimilationist. There are, of course, some differences, of approach, too. Maniam writes more directly and obviously from an inner sense of psychic deprivation. For Maniam, the Indian heritage of Malaysia has never properly been acknowledged and seems never likely to be. Anyway, as V S Naipaul found over in Trinidad, India for post-independence Malaysia is “impossibly remote”(34), even among the Indian community for whom it constitutes a “haunting presence.” (35) Even if it wanted to, India can no longer provide either “emotional sustenance or cultural capital.”(36) So there is much in Maniam’s work about dislocation, abandonment, disorientation. By comparison, there is a more forensic detachment in Fernando’s work, a greater fascination with the public process and possibilities of nation-building. However, even he finds *Malaysia* very difficult to conceive in imaginative terms.

The novels of Fernando and Maniam also share common thematic concerns, which Emmanuel Nelson has helpfully identified as:-

- issues of identity;
- problems of history;
- confrontations with racism;
- intergenerational conflicts;
- difficulties in building new, supportive communities. (37)

Thus Fernando asserts 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,” (38) and Maniam confirms that Malaysia enjoys only a “superficial peace.” (39)

For both Maniam and Fernando, Malaysia has never achieved its multicultural promise, let alone the tantalizing potpourri featured in tourist promotional brochures. In Hindu terms, Malaysia has never been the hoped-for *moksha*, but nor can it be a “fossilized fragment” of India. Instead, political and social trends in Malaysia have directly moved the other way. Are both authors, then, merely “lonely individuals working out their private salvation”? (40) Their novels certainly indicate just how complex and painstaking is the process of the construction of a Malaysian nation, involving both intra-communal and inter-communal issues.

NOTES

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12. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

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15. Naipaul, *Finding a Centre*, p. 44.
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