The Anxieties of Authorship in Malaysian and Singaporean Writings in English: Locating the English Language Writer and the Question of Freedom in the Postcolonial Era

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> The door to open debate and the politics of consensus having been shut, the way seems to be open for writers in English to take the role of an adversary, to liberate themselves from the new colonialism [...]. (Ee 20)

The extract above, taken from Ee Tiang Hong's 1988 article on "Literature and Liberation: The Price of Freedom," is one of the most vocal cries for freedom to emerge from the Malaysian English language literary scene. In his article, Ee, a Malaysian poet, establishes his own ideological position as an "adversary" who opposes the state narratives of race produced by postcolonial Malaysia. To do so otherwise would be unthinkable. As Ee puts it, "to yield to the oppressor, is to die a spiritual death" (20). Among writers in the English language world, there has always been a tradition of associating the English language with the liberal ideology of freedom, and the English language writer with the "higher" aesthetic sensibilities of his/her art. The "art-for-art's sake" view defines the writer as an artist who is committed to his/her art and who must transcend local boundaries and nationalist sentiments to articulate the universal concerns and values of everyman.[1] For Ee, the Malaysian English language writer must write.

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[1] The "art-for-art's sake" movement ushered in the era of progressive modernism at the turn of the century. It began as a call for freedom by nineteenth-century artists in Europe whose aesthetic visions did not comply with the formal rules of academic art nor meet with public approval. They claimed that art should be produced not for society's sake, but for art's sake. The movement was in fact a rebellion against nineteenth-century bourgeois sensibility and conservative morality that dictated the art world; under society's gaze, the artist had to produce works that contained entertainment value, or didactic purpose. By resisting the strictures of society, the artist also expresses his individualism. This notion is captured by Oscar Wilde in his 1891 essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism":

> A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist. (1184)

S/he must believe in the power of the pen and to allow, as Singaporean poet and critic Kirpal Singh describes, the "free flow" of expression ("Political Commitment" 181).

Yet this ideal of freedom is easier proclaimed than achieved. In reality, the English language is one of the most contentious grounds to emerge in the postcolonial landscape since it is fraught with political implications. On the one hand, it resonates with the historical experience of colonial exploitation and oppression, but on the other hand, as a language of global commerce and trade, English is equally vital to the economic development and modernization of third world nations. As former British colonies, Malaysia and Singapore shared this ambivalent attitude towards the English language in the early years of independence, an attitude that was further complicated by both governments' view of English as an "alien" language, "rooted neither in the soul nor in the soil" (Quayum xii). The hostile political tone towards English bore serious implications for Malaysian and Singaporean writers who used the language as their medium of expression. As Shirley Goek-Lin Lim notes: "English language writers are faced with this bilingual ideology — English cannot be a "mother tongue"; it expresses debased Western values and is useful only for international trade and technological purposes [...]. They are also told that not having mastery of their mother tongue (whether Mandarin, Tamil or Malay) signifies inadequacy, deprivation and deculturalization. These writers, consequently, face a severe handicap in legitimizing their place in the national culture" (*Nationalism and Literature* 23).

On top of being told that English is an "alien" language, the English language writer has to contend with another reality in Malaysia and Singapore—the culture of censorship. This culture is the result of the censorship apparatuses operating in the political space, as well as the practices of self-censorship and the censorship of others that have transpired at a societal level. The English language writer's identification with the liberal ideology of freedom is literally under attack from the censorial regimes established in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore. Not only is the writer's ideological role positioned against the dominant state doctrine, but his/her freedom to write is suddenly a dubious right in view of the formidable barriers in place. Due to the changed status of the English language in the postcolonial era and the culture of censorship in place, the writer invariably finds him/herself questioning his/her identity, place, and role in the revised narratives of the nation-space; in other

While many writers of the postcolonial world have claimed the "art-for-art's sake" ideology as part of their struggle against perceived injustices, or for the democratic ideals of equality and freedom, not every writer has readily embraced it. Chinua Achebe for instance, once contemptuously described "art-for-art's sake" as "just another piece of deodorized dog-shit" (25); he insisted that "art is, and was always, in the service of man" (25). Nevertheless, I find this term relevant to my argument due to its strong association with the liberal notion of individual freedom, and for its expression of rebellion against the boundaries prescribed by the dominant discourses of society and the state.

words, how does the English language writer fit into the new scheme of things?

In this essay, I explore the anxieties of authorship[2] through the English language writer's position in the nation-spaces of Malaysia and Singapore and his/her ideals of freedom in the postcolonial era, specifically from the 1970s until the 1990s. In doing so, I hope to show how the revised state narratives on language and race have given rise to different and conflicting perspectives on freedom in these postcolonial contexts. The culture of censorship in both countries has had profound psychological effects on writers through the shaping of identity, subjectivity, and imagination. Yet these effects are often unpredictable as writers respond differently to the notions of power and freedom; this difference can be seen in the writers' psychological state, the choices they make, and the ideological positions they take. Some writers welcome the idea of the nation while others, like Ee, resist what they perceive as an oppressive state ideology. There are also those voices that are ambiguous, even ambivalent, about the liberal ideal of freedom due to the material complexities surrounding the issues of national identity, economic development, and social cohesion. The fragmentation of voices and subjectivities among the English language writers not only reveals conflicting views on power and freedom, but also reflects the ambivalence found among the populace of Malaysia and Singapore where these issues are concerned.

Current views on freedom are invariably premised on the Western liberal discourse of democracy and the prevailing right of the individual; within this discourse, censorship is defined as a repressive exercise of power, a form of domination and oppression that the democratic free world should battle against. Yet this stereotyped binary view overlooks the fact that both censorship and freedom are unstable sites of ideological contestations, nor does it take into account the discursive ways in which

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[2] The term "anxiety of authorship" was first raised by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their groundbreaking feminist study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the nineteenth-century female writer, having internalized the Victorian ideals of female inferiority and submissiveness, had to struggle to overcome the barriers erected by patriarchy as well as her own internalized fears and inhibitions in order to write. The "anxiety of authorship" thus reflects her conflicted psychological state, the anxiety and fear that clashed with her desire to claim an authorship whose tradition has historically been male-centred. Since the female writer is doubly displaced, both as woman and as writer, by society and by literary tradition, she must recover her voice and place through her "matrilineal heritage of literary strength" (59). The theory of "anxiety of authorship" has since been used in feminist criticisms to analyze the devious rhetorical strategies used to circumvent patriarchy's control, or to examine the link between women's writings and her "matrilineal heritage." Although my focus is not gender-specific, I've decided to appropriate the term "anxiety of authorship" as it aptly describes a similar psychological conflict experienced by Malaysian and Singaporean writers, since they too have to negotiate between their desire for authorship and their internalized fears of the prohibitions posed by censorship discourse, both in the private and social realms.

these concepts are negotiated and produced in different socio-political, historical and cultural contexts. Contrary to the Eurocentric model, freedom has been redefined by Malaysia and Singapore as national security and social order rather than individual liberties. Due to the traumatic memory of the race riots in the 1960s and the difficulties in managing race relations, authoritarian measures that include censorship mechanisms and repressive laws are actually "welcomed", especially if it is perceived that they can bring about socio-political stability.[3] This contradictory stance towards the liberal notion of democratic freedom is to some extent explained by Lucian W. Pye in *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*; he argues that in responding to the pressures of modernization, Asian political cultures have developed "different concepts about what the nature and limits of political power should be" (vii) compared to their Western counterparts. These political transformations stem from traditional notions of power located within native patriarchal cultures that are community-oriented, and as a result, varying models of authoritarian and paternal forms of leadership have mushroomed across Asia in the past few decades.[4] Both historical and cultural continuity are therefore major factors that contribute to legitimizing paternalistic and authoritarian leadership at the political level.

This is also one reason why both the Malaysian and Singaporean political contexts constitute some of the most complex stories of modern state power today. Although both nations have inherited the colonial legacy of a democratic parliamentary system, they have deviated somewhat from that system with their unique brand of paternalistic "Asian-style" leadership. Such postcolonial revisions of power and freedom not only highlight the ambivalence as well as the difference that define the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts, they have also complicated the intrinsic arguments surrounding the culture of censorship, thereby adding to the anxieties of authorship experienced by English language writers. These anxieties—discerned from the writer's subjectivity and his/her subject-position vis-à-vis state narratives—are thus vital to our understanding of the varied ways in which freedom is perceived or defined. Due to the countries' different policies on race administration, there are certain disparities that distinguish the English language writer's subject position in Malaysia from that of his/her counterpart in Singapore. As such, a comparison study of the two

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[3] In his discussion of the Malaysian middle class and its attitude towards democracy, Harold Crouch notes this difference towards freedom: "[T]he middle class was by no means committed to full democracy; its members usually welcomed authoritarian measures intended to preserve the system from the threat of political instability [...]" (195).

[4] It cannot be denied that there are strong emotional and psychological relations between subjects and their national "Fathers," especially in Asian contexts. The "Father" phenomenon is exemplified by India's Gandhi, China's Mao, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, Indonesia's General Suharto, and Malaysia's Tunku Abdul Rahman. For details, see *Asian Power and Politics*, by Lucian Pye.

countries' geo-political histories and their subsequent divergent paths in developing race narratives will give us a clearer picture of the material complexities that Malaysian and Singaporean writers found themselves grappling with.

By the time Malaysia and Singapore had achieved independence from the British Empire, the former in 1957 and the latter in 1965, both countries were already home to culturally, racially and linguistically diverse populations that comprised Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians.[5] Not surprisingly, their history of political struggle was fraught with deep anxieties that revolved around the thorny issue of managing communal relations without overlooking the pressing need for stable national and cultural identities. Indeed, the 1964 ethnic clashes in Singapore and the 1969 racial riots in Malaysia underscored the volatility of inter-communal cultural and religious tensions. Since then, both nations have adopted different ideological approaches towards race management. Today, Malaysia's ethnic management is based on Malay hegemony, and its pro-Malay policies inevitably brought about the sidelining of non-Malay races such as the minority Chinese and Indians. Malaysia's exclusionary practices are thus founded on the colonial law of divide and rule. On the other hand, Singapore introduced the policy of multi-racialism, whereby all major ethnic groups are granted equal status and privileges. However, the national ideal of equality is undermined by the Chinese ascendancy in politics and economy. Moreover, the assertion of Confucian values in the 1980s not only led to the revival of Chinese culture and language, but this all-inclusive rhetoric dominated the socio-political life of Singapore.

In Malaysia, where historically there have been clear-cut divisions in the multi-ethnic population, the race riots of May 13, 1969 held far-reaching political consequences for the non-Malays.[6] A series of political

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[5] Malaysia is mainly characterized by three ethnic groups—the Malays (60 percent), the Chinese (Malaysia has the largest Chinese minority in Southeast Asia—they make up 27 percent of the population) and the Indians (10 percent). The rest of the population comprises Eurasians and the indigenous tribes of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Added to this bewildering mix are the many sub-ethnic categories contained within each racial group; this rich diversity is reflected through language or dialect variance, clan associations, caste, and religious disparities. For the immigrant races, differences also stem from the divergent places of origin in China and India. Singapore supports almost as varied a population as Malaysia does, with one exception; the landscape is dominated by the Chinese, who forms 77 percent of the island's 3.6 million people.
[6] According to Collin Abraham's *Divide and Rule: The Roots of Race Relations in Malaysia*, the British employed the ideology of "divide and rule" to control the Chinese and Indian immigrants who were brought in as cheap labour for tin and rubber production at the turn of the twentieth century. The immigrants were subjected to ethnic partitioning according to labour and geographical divisions in British Malaya; each racial group was isolated in their own cultural enclaves and spatial territories, while the British played the racial card to their own advantage. However, the hierarchical and spatial demarcations resulted in an uneasy co-existence among the ethnic groups under the British rule. By the time independence was achieved, the racial, cultural and religious tensions among the

reforms were instituted to address the grievances of the Malays, including the National Education Policy and the New Economic Policy (NEP); these state policies were designed to establish the superior Malay status through language, education, and economy.[7] The reclamation of economic and political rights not only gave rise to the label *Bumiputera* ("Prince of the Soil") to assert the "native" status of the Malays, but it also made emphatic the marginal status of the non-Malays during the post-riot years of the 1970s. In the late 1980s, Ee observed that the political culture was one of "Malay hegemony in every major sphere of life" ("Literature and Liberation" 18), and that "every `ideological state apparatus' (Althusser) has been utilized to impose an exclusively Malay identity on a society that is in reality multi-ethnic" (18). Ee's reference to Louis Althusser's famous essay on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" is based on the wide range of repressive laws and security measures adopted by the government, with the rationale that they were needed to rein in the potentially explosive inter-communal, cultural, and religious differences.[8]

Malays, Chinese and Indians had been exacerbated by glaring socio-economic disparities as well. Ethnic tension, particularly between the two dominant racial groups—the Malays and the Chinese—escalated sharply during the 1960s due to perceived injustices on each side, and finally exploded on May 13, 1969. For further details of the riots, see *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia: 1945-1983* by Richard Clutterbuck and *Communal Violence in Malaysia 1969: The Political Aftermath* by Felix Gagliano.

[7] According to Zakaria Haji Ahmad's article, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society" (1989), the most important policies implemented during the 1970s were the National Education Policy and the New Economic Policy (NEP). Under the former policy, the Malay language was "vigorously implemented as the medium of instruction right through the university" (363). But it was the NEP which was fundamental in rectifying the perceived failings of the system that had resulted in the bloody events of 13 May:

> The NEP, as an economic basis for the post-1969 political system, specified the ultimate goal of national unity through a two-pronged strategy of poverty eradication and of "restructuring," by which was meant the reduction, if not elimination, of the identification of race with vocation. Rather than accept the feature of Malaysian social structure in which the non-Malays dominated the business and economic sectors and the Malays the agricultural and nonmodern sectors, a conscious effort was to be made to "urbanize" the Malays and assist them in gaining access to the more modern sector of the economy so that they could, at a minimum, be on par with the more advanced non-Malays. (363)

[8] Refer to the Malaysian Constitution for the full enormity of such repressive acts. In fact, many of them were appropriated from the British rule, including the Internal Security Act (ISA), Restricted Residence Act (1933) and the Sedition Act (1948). After independence, laws that curtail the freedom of civil and legal rights can be found in the Emergency (Public Order and Prevention of Crime) Ordinance 1969 (EPOPCO), the Dangerous Drugs (Special Preventive Measures) Act 1985, the Societies Act 1966, the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, the Police Act, the Trade Unions Act, and the Penal Code, any of which can be used to violate certain rights to freedom, including freedom of association, movement and assembly. However, laws that directly curb the freedom of speech and press are the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984

By enforcing and encouraging the production of censorship, especially with regards to Malay rights, within legal and social frameworks, the Malaysian government reinforced the "divide and rule" ideology that had been at the heart of colonial expansionism. If, according to Benedict Anderson, the nation is by definition "an imagined political community" (6), then the Malaysian imagination was fractured from the start by the socio-political imbalances engendered by legally sanctioned racial barriers between Malay and non-Malay. In writing her memoir, *Lane With No Name: Memoirs & Poems of a Malaysian-Chinese Girlhood*, Malaysian poet Hilary Tham discovers a place that "repelled thought," censored, in the deepest recesses of her psyche:

> I did not know there was an uncultivated grass field in my mind, a place I avoided, a place covered with sharp-edged *lallang* that repelled thought, a subject marked "taboo," not to talk about, not to think about; until my publisher pointed it out. He noticed that I write about Indian immigrants, about the Chinese I grew up with, but that I barely mention the Malays who make up the majority of Malaysia's population. [...] Strange to realize that I met and talked with Malays in Malay, almost daily, yet this part of my life was sealed off from my thinking and my writing. It was a habit trained into me from early days. I had become unaware of its existence, so deeply had I been conditioned.
> *Do not talk about the Malays*. (173-4)

Faced with the racial/cultural/religious dichotomy of the Malay/Chinese, Tham unconsciously blanks out the image of the Chinese' constructed Otherness by erasing the image of the Malays. The unconscious racial censorship of the Malays, "a subject marked taboo" in Tham's mind, depicts the deep-seated communal divide that is created by the Malay/non-Malay hierarchy. As a minority ethnic group against whom discrimination is reinforced by the Constitution, the Malaysian Chinese will always be labelled as non-*Bumiputera*, not original or indigenous to the land, forever reminded of their migrant history and secondary status.[9]

(PPPA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA). Laws that allow for detention without trial are ISA, EPOPCO and the Dangerous Drugs Act. The Restricted Residence Act limits freedom of movement. Laws that restrict freedom of association are the Societies Act 1966 and the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Trade Unions Act 1956. Restrictions on freedom of assembly and peaceful protest are detailed in the Police Act and the Penal Code. The latter is also responsible for limiting the rights of non-discrimination and the right to privacy. For a full appreciation of how these acts have been used to curb anti-government protests, refer to Amnesty International's 1999 report on Malaysia titled "Malaysia: Human Rights Undermined--Restrictive Laws in a Parliamentary Democracy." *Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia* by Anne Munro-Kua also provides a detailed historical analysis of state repression in Malaysia.

[9] If the politicized identity of *Bumiputera* demarcates the special position and privileges of the native Malays, then "non-*Bumiputera*" denotes the secondary rank of the "immigrant" races, which include the minority races of the Chinese and the Indians. Until today, the politicized identity still functions to delineate "the dominant-subordinate relationship that exists between the Malays and the Chinese" (Lee iv) in postcolonial Malaysia. For details, see *Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia* by Anne Munro-Kua, page 5 and *Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia* by Raymond Lee, pages 28-46.

For the English language writers in Malaysia, there has always been the added complication of race. The majority of them were non-Malays who, after 1969, suddenly found themselves relocated to the margin. To worsen matters, the gazetting of Malay as the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, further weakened the already shaky position occupied by non-Malay writers and poets. The haunting feeling of being uprooted and displaced, the searing sense of "not-belonging" which dogged many non-Malays following the post-1969 years, inevitably culminated in exile. As Ee observes, "Malaysian writers have chosen to protest by leaving the country, preferring the uncertainties of exile to the certainties of being humiliated, overtly or in many subtle ways" ("Literature and Liberation" 20). Ee in fact describes his own experience in these lines, for he migrated to Australia in late 1975. His decision came at the cost of disillusionment, homelessness and despair, and yet, it was a price he was willing to pay in order to uphold his ideal of freedom: "I decided to leave Malaysia for good—but only after I was convinced that those involved in manipulating the organs of the state were bent on putting down any non-Malay who wrote in English" (35). A year later in 1976, Ee published some of his most moving works in *Myths for a Wilderness*. In this collection, Ee's desperate sense of loss and restrained bitterness that mark the state of exile are clearly rendered in the poem "Requiem," which ponders upon the irrevocable loss, "the great divide," that is brought about by the "lesson of May 13." The poem's brooding sensibility is heightened by futility and quiet despair:

> Date from this day onwards
> Whatever you will,
> Use the momentous day
> As it suits you, but with reverence,
> As befits the great divide.
>
> Tell your children to remember
> The lesson of May 13,
> Or tell them to forget
> The friends and relatives who died,
> It makes no difference,
>
> Sun and moon will rise tomorrow
> Sun and moon will set
>
> For all our sorrow. (55)

Ee is not alone in his rejection of the new national ideology. Malaysian writer-poet Shirley Lim not only shares his ideological view, but like Ee, she too joined the ranks of Malaysian exiles in search of a new homeland. In her memoir, *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, Lim recalls her reasons for leaving the country: "After the disillusionment of the May 13 riots, however, I had no nationalist idealism to imagine. The cultural parochialism that took shape in the aftermath of

the riots in Malaysia, which includes race-based quotas, communalist politics, and separatist race-essentialized cultures, was absolutely anathema to me" (279). She also writes: "Twenty-five years after this trauma, however, millions of Malaysians of Chinese descent still resident in the country, and thousands more in a global diaspora, continue to bear witness to the ideal of an equitable homeland for all Malaysians" (211). As a Malaysian who migrated to the United States, Lim's quest for a "homeland" attests to the experience of homelessness and displacement that infused the Chinese subjectivity in post-1969 Malaysia.

The testimonies of Ee and Lim stress that the Malaysian experience of exile is not confined only to notions of being driven from one's homeland, or of physical alienation, as they also reflect to some extent the writers' psychological state of mind and being. As Ee points out, there are "others who have chosen to remain in the country, but their being ostracized by those responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and culture makes them exiles all the same" ("Literature and Liberation" 20).[10] Singh concurs, in that the Malaysian writer in English should be viewed as a "linguistic exile" ("The Only Way Out" 34) since "writing in English is accorded negligible attention" (34) in the country. Due to the political biases surrounding language, only works written in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, are defined as national literature, while all literatures produced in other languages are considered as "sectional" or "communal" literatures. According to Malaysian playwright Kee Thuan Chye, the exclusion from national status has also meant that the "`sectional' or `communal' literatures do not enjoy support, funding or recognition from official sources, despite the fact that they are no less Malaysian in substance and expression" ("Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia" 4). For Kee, such exclusionary practices not only strip the writer of the incentive to write, but they also serve to isolate the writer from his/her society since "his ethnic origin is often considered above the ideas he expresses" (5). No writer, he argues, can feel comfortable with "the continued practice of keeping the literary commonwealth restrictive rather than all-encompassing [...] because it goes against norms that writers would uphold rather than reject. It divides rather than [harmonizes], stirs up feelings of envy, and fosters defensiveness on the part of the privileged and distrust on the part of the marginalized" (5).

Years after the traumatic experience of 1969, Malaysian writers—whether local or overseas—continue to draw on the images of loss, displacement, exclusion, and exile in their works. Some of the better-known works that have emerged are Lloyd Fernando's political novel *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and Ee's collection of poetry in *Myths for a Wilderness* (1976) and *Tranquerah* (1985). Women writers, most notably

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[10] Ee made this observation in reference to the following writers: Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando, Johnny Ong, Lee Geok Lan, Edward Dorall, Patrick Teoh, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, Pretam Kaur, Wong Phui Nam, Cecil Rajendra, Kee Thuan Chye, and K.S. Maniam.

Chuah Guat Eng and Shirley Lim, also tap the tragedy of May 13 in *Echoes of Silence* (1994) and *Joss and Gold* (2001) respectively. While the former focuses on the dispossession and dislocation of the central character, Ai Lian, who goes into exile after the race riots, the latter evokes the racial and linguistic tensions that seared the socio-political scene preceding the violent events of May 13. Other brave voices who refuse to keep silent, and who attempt to test the local political boundaries by dissecting images and experiences of the marginalized other, can be found in Cecil Rajendra's collection of poems in *Bones and Feathers* (1978) and two of Kee's allegorical plays, the Orwell-inspired piece of *1984: Here and Now* (1987) and the political satire, *The Big Purge* (2004).

For the local Malaysian writer who wishes to survive in an environment where tight censorship laws and controls are long established, and where self-censorship mechanisms are already inbred, the anxiety of authorship is very real. But for the non-Malay writer whose medium of expression is English, the anxieties are multiplied, for both subject position and language occupy the fringes of the Malaysian socio-political reality. In the local English writing world, the anxieties of authorship are translated into a visible "lack" or "vacuum." Back in 1988, Ee insisted that the "writers in English [are] languish[ing] on the periphery of national development" ("Literature and Liberation" 19). His observation still holds true. After forty years of independence, the lack or absence of writings in English is so glaring that local columnist Amir Muhammad made this wry comment: "There are so few outlets for English-language creative writing in this country that you'd be forgiven for thinking that there are no writers around."[11]

It is not as though all writing activities have come to a complete halt, but the problem still remains in that past efforts at literary production have been fragmented or altogether unsustainable. Take the example of Rehman Rashid who, after his first book *A Malaysian Journey* (1993), seems to have disappeared from the English writing scene. In 1997, a series of ten books was launched by Rhino Press to showcase young Malaysian English writers. But as Muhammad points out, "out of the ten young writers in the series, most are now either being published sporadically or not at all—and Rhino Press itself has become extinct."[12] Another factor that accounts for this vacuum is, of course, the literal emptying of literary and imaginative life through the mass migration of Malaysians, mainly the Chinese, who sought greener pastures abroad. As a result, in the past decade there has been a growing corpus of writings in English produced by Malaysians located overseas.[13] Among the younger women writers to emerge on the

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[11] For an informative overview of the literary works produced in English by Malaysian writers, refer to "Smorgasbord: English on the Rise? The State of Malaysia's Home-grown English Literature According to Amir Muhammad" (2001) in <http://www.kakiseni,com/articles/columns/MDA3NQ.html>.

[12] Ibid.

[13] A critic once asked: "Would you be as disturbed as I am, knowing that none of the Malaysian winners in the [*Asiaweek* short story] collection are still living in Malaysia?"

international publishing scene are Beth Yahp, Ooi Yang May and Rani Manicka.[14] If the "local English-language writing closely reflects the sociopolitical and material reality of the local English-language world" (Lim, "Finding a Native Voice" 33), then the gaping void that defines the local English writing scene in Malaysia can be said to reflect a culture of censorship; the external boundaries imposed on subjectivities over thirty years ago have since been internalized and reproduced, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, through established subject positions in the nation-space.

In contrast to Malaysia, the dramas of censorship are played out very differently in Singapore. Singapore's concerns with communal relations and ethnic identities are no less complex and problematic since the cultural, racial and linguistic diversity it supports is almost as varied as Malaysia's. However, the story of Singapore differs significantly due to its sinicized landscape: the Chinese form 77 percent of the island's 3.6 million people. Although the binary codes between self and other still prevail, the roles are now reversed; it is the Malay who is relegated to minority status, while the Chinese occupies a higher economic and socio-political rank. The inversion of roles can be discerned in Fiona Cheong's *The Scent of the Gods* where a young Singaporean Chinese girl, Esha, finds out from her grandmother that Malays are "old-fashioned people" (13) while the Chinese "believed in progress" (13). Grandmother's words are further given weight by the state's authoritative definition of the Malays: "Our history books described them as primitive people who collected bark from the gelam tree and used it to make awnings and sails for their boats" (23). As Esha later realizes, the "Chinese had always looked down on the Malays as a backward people who had proved their ignorance by choosing not to follow in the footsteps of our British forefathers" (13).

Although the overwhelming Chinese numbers have naturally ensured that only one race controlled both economic and political powers, Singapore's leaders are also well aware of the island-state's obvious disadvantages as the smallest country in a predominantly Islamic Indo-Malay world. Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), has always been cautious in downplaying racial and religious differences by adopting corporatist features of meritocracy and competition to manage ethnic relations.[15] At the same time, the PAP also lays emphasis on the

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(qtd. in Mallari 60). The anthology of prize winning short stories can be found in *Prizewinning Asian Fiction* (1991). The Malaysian winners included Shirley Lim, Nalla Tan, and Ooi Kee Saik. All three no longer live in Malaysia.

[14] I refer to Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury* (1992), Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998) and *Mindgame* (2000), and Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2002). All three writers had their works published abroad; Yahp originally published her novel in Australia, while Ooi and Manicka had theirs published in the United Kingdom.

[15] Corporatism, according to David Brown, "refers to attempts by an avowedly autonomous state elite to organize the diverse interest associations in society so that their interests can be accommodated within the interdependent and organic national

policy of multi-racialism and multi-culturalism; this policy is extended to language as well. Under the banner of multiculturalism, the PAP has introduced a policy of "pragmatic multilingualism" (Kuo and Jernudd 28) where all four languages are chosen to represent Singapore's multi-linguistic diversity—Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and English. Unlike Malaysia, Singapore chooses "not to defend its traditions, values, and integrative community-forming communications by excluding an `international language' from domestic use. Instead, it incorporates English, even to the extent of identifying future Singapore with it" (Kuo and Jernudd 30). Since all four languages are equally recognized as official languages in Singapore, the literatures produced in any one of these languages are automatically accorded national status.

Between Malaysia and Singapore, there are thus clear-cut differences in the political treatment of the role of the English language in the contemporary scene.[16] And unlike his/her counterpart in Malaysia, the Singaporean writer whose language is English is not burdened with the sense of racial/linguistic discrimination, nor is s/he faced with the frustration of being excluded from "national" canons of literary production. In addition to the "friendlier" political environment, Singaporean writers are also encouraged by the positive changes in the PAP's attitude towards the local arts industry. The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge boom in literary production due to the aggressive measures and campaigns (such as the Singapore Arts Festival) led by the government. Incentives that included literary awards, funding and grants, creative writing competitions, and other talent development programs have contributed significantly to the flowering of artistic expression in the island-state. Singaporeans who first made their impact on the literary scene in the 1960s and early 1970s were Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng, Arthur Yap, Robert Yeo, and Goh Poh Seng. The 1980s saw the emergence of prominent writers like Catherine Lim, Christine Su-Chen Lim, and Gopal Baratham, while the 1990s ushered in the talents of Rex

community" (67). The Singaporean leaders, while adopting the corporatist structural features that sanction rank and hierarchy through the corporate ladder, and division through specialization, make little attempt to accommodate society's interests. Instead, they prefer "a strategy of increasingly interventionist management" (66) that allows them to manipulate and control large sections of the citizenry in the name of national stability.
[16] Although there are close similarities in the ambivalent manner with which Malaysia and Singapore had approached the English language in the past, these similarities were significantly reduced by the 1980s. Since 1985, there has been a growing political confidence towards the role of English in Singapore. The change in perspective is largely brought about by pragmatic purposes. As Kuo and Jernudd note: "Of the four official languages, English is the only one which is not Asian in origin. It is hence regarded as `neutral' for inter-group relations in Singapore [...]. As the language of the colonial government, English has been retained as the administrative language in independent Singapore. Moreover, its perceived importance for, and actual use in, higher education, international trade, and modern industry and technology have strengthened over the years. [...] It is obvious that English is of instrumental value both from the societal perspective of economic growth, and from the individual perspectives of social mobility and economic gain" (29).

Shelley, Hwee Hwee Tan, Eddie Tay, Claire Tham, Philip Jeyaretnam, and Colin Cheong.[17] Today, the Singaporean author or poet writing in English not only enjoys growing support from local audiences, but also nationwide standing and recognition; all these visible signs of success are conspicuously missing from the Malaysian scenario.

Despite the rosy image painted by the government over the prominent role of English in Singapore, some writers, like Catherine Lim, observe otherwise:

> One of the insecurities that has translated into some difficulty for the writer in English concerns the matter of censorship. The authorities are not worried about the writers in Chinese, Malay or Tamil, but they are wary of the writer in English who is more critical and questioning and more likely to write on the forbidden subjects. (C. Lim 39)

Lim, of course, refers to the traditional connection between the language and freedom, the "art-for-art's sake" view espoused by many writers of the English language world. In Singapore, the ideology of freedom found popular support among certain writers who could no longer tolerate what they perceive as the PAP's stranglehold over artistic expression. Lau Siew Mei for instance, was compelled to leave Singapore in order to pursue her dream, "the freedom to write" (Wu A21).

In an interview with Lau, Amy Wu states that the writer's "memory of the Singapore she grew up in was one of repression, and a city devoid of a literary scene" (A21). Lau recalls that there "are a lot of things that they don't want to hear; you can't explore, or think or analyse or be critical" (qtd. in Wu A21). Lau's memory is based on the politically sensitive climate of the 1980s when, under then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's administration, the island-state saw a rise in authoritarian trends with the implementation of draconian laws.[18] In *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame*, James Gomez perceives that the PAP's extensive control over its citizenry as well as Lee's authoritarian-paternalistic style of leadership have generated a censorial climate. When fear is added into the equation, Gomez argues, self-censorship is inevitable:

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[17] "The Write Stuff: The Development of Singapore Literature in English" by Seet Khiam Keong traces the genealogy of Singaporean writers and poets through each successive decade, from the 1960s right up to the 1990s.

[18] Like Malaysia, the Singapore government has wide powers to limit civil liberties and cripple opposition strengths. Under Singapore's Constitution, laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLA), the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), and the Undesirable Publications Act (UPA), allow for arrests to be made without warrants, while the ISA, the CLA and the MDA also have provisions for preventive detention without trial. Freedom of association is curbed by the Societies Act, which requires any group of more than 10 persons to be registered with the government. Freedom of speech and the press is controlled by the ISA and the UPA; both grant the government powers to prohibit, ban, seize and censor subversive or sensitive publications. Media constraints were further imposed through the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, 1986, which enables the government to restrict the circulation of foreign publications if they interfere with Singapore's internal affairs.

> The obsession with self-restriction is a product of the political structure. The political culture, which has emerged from a dominant one-party state, is clearly a censorial one. It results in suspicion of alternative political viewpoints, acute self-censorship and censorship of others. This in turn breeds political apathy, conformity, avoidance and the reduction of alternative opinion to personal vilification. (52-53)

Gomez's criticism of the "political apathy" and "conformity" of the Singaporean society is reflected in Lau Siew Mei's first novel, *Playing Madame Mao*, which draws on the turbulent events of 1987 when the government implemented the Security Act and made political arrests. The text indirectly criticizes Singapore's authoritarian practices through the allegorical figures of Chairman Mao and his Red Guards. At the same time, Lau employs the "chicken coop" metaphor to capture the psychological map of Singaporeans who have placed economic and personal security above political rights. The metaphor not only suggests the people's inability to imagine beyond the space they have been confined to, it also suggests that they have internalized the tropes of self-censorship to the point where they have lost the capacity to think for themselves:

> We are living in a chicken coop society, [...]. Even if the door of the coop were to open, we would remain because here we are given food and shelter, we have grown fat. We have traded in our freedom for bread. We are kept people. We let the government do our thinking for us. (20)

Unable to accept these claustrophobic conditions, Lau finally joined the Singaporean diaspora, and migrated to Australia in 1994. For the Singaporean writer in English, the idea of "migration" takes on very different nuances as it does not reflect the sense of exile, exclusion and loss that informs the Malaysian writers' subjectivity. According to Ismail S. Talib, "the reason for emigration for Singapore writers, [...], is seldom economic, but can usually be better described as educational or broadly political, and this reason may be reflected in their work" (274). Even though the end result is still migration, the Singaporean writer's political awareness stems from a very different root—the desire for artistic freedom from the all-inclusive ideological boundaries of the state, as evinced by Lau's case.

Freedom is a perilous position for the English language writer to be connected with, especially in view of the strict political boundaries that dictate what writers can or cannot write. In Singapore, the "art-for-art's sake" standpoint is pitted against the prevailing state emphasis on "art-for-society's sake." Just a few years ago in November 2000, the Minister of State (Defence, Information and the Arts) David Lim cautioned Singaporean artists "to [recognize] and accept that there is a need to try and resolve this apparent dilemma: achieving artistic integrity, while at the same time being socially responsible" (qtd. in Ong 8). The call for social responsibility came in the wake of the public furore over the Tamil production of a play called "Talaq," which drew attention to the problems

of domestic violence within the Indian-Muslim community. For fear of offending religious and ethnic sensibilities, the National Arts Council (NAC) subsequently banned the play.[19] It cannot be denied that Singapore has a track record for banning material and fining artists whose works have been deemed controversial and sensitive. In the past, the PAP "had to be seen to act" (Ong 9) when they cracked down on artistic dissidents. As one of the artists recalls: "Previously, if you did something that's off centre, our actors were followed by the Internal Security Department officers" (qtd. in Ong 9).

The visible manner in which repressive measures have been enforced holds certain psychological ramifications for the writer, since it encourages in him/her a constant state of self-surveillance and self-censorship. In this sense, both Singaporean and Malaysian English language writers are in the same boat as they are confronted by the anxieties of authorship. Not only are they conscious of the need to strike a balance between the freedom to write and their social "duty" as responsible citizens, but creative critiques of the nation are a difficult and complex task when the writer's freedom only extends as far as what is permitted within the perimeters of state politics. In Malaysia, Kee perceives that "no writer has yet been detained under the [Internal Security] Act specifically for his writing [...] because we have become adept at practising self-censorship. We learn quickly what to exclude from our texts if we want our writings published" ("Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia" 6). Kee's view is closely echoed by Catherine Lim in Singapore; she maintains that "there is a great deal of self-censorship by publishers and by writers themselves. Any topic that could be construed as even remotely touching upon sensitive issues of race, language and religion in this multiethnic society is likely to be self-censored out at the manuscript stage" (39). Lim should have added "politics" to the list of taboo issues. Three years later, she became the centre of controversy when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong publicly reprimanded her in the *Sunday Times* for making comments on the government.[20] In the letter, Goh made it very clear that criticisms against the government were not allowed: "If you want to criticize the Government, you must enter politics, otherwise you refrain from political criticism" (qtd. in Tamney 74).

With so many barriers in place, some critics argue that the writer's imagination has invariably been tamed and regulated by the strictures of the state. Kee, for one, certainly seems to believe that Malaysian writers have capitulated to the "culture of fear" ("Sharing a Commonwealth in Malaysia" 6); quoting Sinclair Lewis, the playwright describes Malaysian writers as "safe, polite, obedient, and sterile" (6). Kee's view is shared by

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[19] Refer to Ong Sor Fern's article on "Artistic Integrity vs. Social Responsibility" for details.

[20] The controversy was caused by two short essays published by Lim in the local English newspaper, the *Straits Times*. See *The Struggle Over Singapore's Soul* by Joseph Tamney, pages 73-4, for details.

Muhammad who, as the editor for the first edition of *Silverfish New Writing: An Anthology of Stories from Malaysia, Singapore and Beyond*, noted that the entries are still on the "conservative" side: "I did actually wish there were more stories that were political, sexy, that wrestled with Sensitive Issues or experimented with the form" (11). The cautious tone emanating from the English language scene in Malaysia is also observed in Singapore. In "Novels of National Identity and Inter-National Interpretation," Ruth Morse contends that Singaporean women writers like Catherine Lim, Stella Kon and Christine Lim politically toe the line by adopting a cautious mentality and attitude in their works. She believes that these writers often play "safe" by relying on stereotyped binary dialectics of the East against West such as "materialism vs. spiritual value, ethnocentricity vs. multiculturalism, conservatism vs. progress, authoritarianism vs. participatory democracy, or traditional family structures vs. individualism."[21] Morse also writes:

> So far from being dangerous, these novels, by concentrating on the values that are to make Singaporean national identity, play directly into the hands of a government that wants its artists to perform the useful function of creating that identity. These are all novels that—despite their manifest intentions—exactly meet the expectations of the governmental agenda [...]. [22]

By emphasizing the literary features of "caution" and conformity to the state narratives of national identity, the writers and critics above reveal a preoccupation with the notion of freedom as opposing state censorship. However, not every writer readily adopts an opposing stance towards the state. According to Shirley Lim, a few Singaporean writers have "accepted these articulations [of state ideology] and made it their business to be a spokesman for them" ("Nationalism and Literature" 18). She also notices that other writers are more ambiguous about freedom; they are of the view that the freedom to write should transcend political or social barriers. Singaporean poet Arthur Yap once said in an interview: "I don't think it's a poet's business to be a spokesman of any kind. [...] I'm not a person who wants to write poems with a political basis or a social basis, commenting upon society as such" (qtd. in S. Lim, "Nationalism and Literature" 18). Singapore's literary giant, Edwin Thumboo,[23] holds a similar perspective;

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[21] Morse's readings are derived from Catherine Lim's *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982), Christine Su-Chen Lim's *Rice Bowl* (1984) and Stella Kon's *The Scholar and the Dragon* (1986). For details, refer to "Novels of National Identity and Inter-National Interpretation" in *College Literature* 19.3/20.1 (Oct92-Feb93): 60-77. In this essay, the information quoted from the article was retrieved from the EBSCO host <http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9308055697&db=aph>.

[22] Ibid.

[23] One of Singapore's pioneer poets, Edwin Thumboo has had an illustrious career not only as a poet, but also as a writer and critic on the subject of literature and its development in Singapore. Widely considered as Singapore's "unofficial poet laureate" (Seet "The Write Stuff"), Thumboo has written four volumes of poetry: *Rib of Earth* (1956), *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979) and *A Third Map* (1993), and two collections of nursery rhymes: *Child's Delight 1 & 2* (1972). Thumboo has also

he believes that the poet's freedom can only be maintained if it is divorced from the "norm" or "what is 'doctrinal to the nation'." According to Thumboo, the poet should "avoid dealing with National Identity. To take it would be to risk his personal identity, his own image of himself. For National Identity implies a summing up of attributes, a levelling off" (qtd. in S. Lim, "Nationalism and Literature" 18).

There are, as Lim points out, inherent paradoxes arising from the writers' identification with freedom as separate from institutional or political spaces: "In so much as writers value their freedom from political and institutional objectives, their definition of their art tends to constrict to exclude any reflection or representation of political and institutional concern and activity" (20). Nevertheless, this double-edged paradox only goes to show that the position of freedom occupied by the English language writer is not always polemical, but is rendered ambiguous, and even ambivalent at times. Tham for instance, had unwittingly reproduced the state discourse through the unconscious practice of self-censorship, a "habit trained into me from early days" (173). Her example stresses that the English language writer's position on freedom is not always clear-cut, for the writer too is interwoven into the systems of signification produced by his/her material reality. This is also the reason why Chuah Guat Eng hesitates to categorize freedom as "good" and censorship as "bad." In a private interview, the Malaysian writer points out that censorship and freedom should not be seen as foes, for their relationship is a mutually constitutive one: "Every time you speak, you censor yourself." Furthermore, she emphasizes that "there is no such thing as total freedom and there will always be restrictions" (Interview).

It is true that much of the writers' ambivalence about the call for freedom has not been explicitly made, but it can, nevertheless, be detected in their writings. In Chuah's *Echoes of Silence*, the writer's conviction of the dialectical relations between censorship and freedom is reflected in the double-edged motifs of loss and gain that she uses to illustrate the internalized conflict of the protagonist, Ai Lian. The novel's opening depicts a disillusioned Ai Lian leaving Malaysia after the 1969 race riots, but the reader's assumption of Ai Lian's powerlessness is momentarily displaced when her exile is paradoxically exercised as choice. Despite her marginal status as a member of the Chinese minority, Ai Lian's financial wealth allows her the luxury of choice as well as the freedom of movement. When she inherits money from her grandmother, Ai Lian realizes that "it was possible for me to leave the country and become, if I so chose, a citizen of the world" (216). By opting for voluntary exile, Ai Lian's censored position in the discourse ironically becomes the site of her

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edited numerous anthologies, including *The Flowering Tree* (1970), *Seven Poets: Singapore/Malaysia, An Anthology* (1973) and *The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore* (1979), *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures: The Poetry of Singapore* (1985), and *The Fiction of Singapore* (1990). Visit the National University of Singapore's website for a comprehensive biodata of Thumboo's life and the related links to his writings: <http://www.nus.edu.sg/NUSinfo/CFA/Prof's/biodata.html>.

enablement; hence her departure at the start of the novel should also be seen as an act of choice, a display of agency as she sees herself as "a wandering Chinese Malaysian in search of friendly soil to strike root" (26).

The ambivalence about the ideal of freedom experienced by some writers can also be due to their different experiences of time and space. I have in mind the younger generation of English language writers who have not been burdened with the memory of the race riots, or with the experience of dislocation from centre to margin, and who do not necessarily perceive the English language as a "colonial" language. Some of the younger writers who emerged in the 1990s engage themes on freedom and censorship that are no less complex, but they do reveal a different line of thinking altogether. In *The Scent of the Gods* for instance, the young protagonist Esha questions her cousin Li Shin about Singapore's unique vision of democracy:

> "What is a guided democracy?" I asked.
> He said this meant we were guided by the Prime Minister, who was head of PAP.
> We were not like America. America was a free democracy, he said, because American people did not like being guided.
> "How come we don't want a free democracy?" I asked.
> "Because we're Asians," he said. "We don't always believe the same things as Americans." (Cheong 50)

The excerpt above evokes a very different imagination of freedom through the hybrid notion of "guided democracy." The assertion of difference not only affirms the Singaporean identity as "Asians" whose belief and value systems are different from the "other," the West, but it also interrogates the hegemonic view of freedom that has long been held by liberal discourse. The idea of "guided democracy" thus emphasizes freedom and the corresponding notions of power and censorship as discursive products that have been shaped by the Confucian ideology of the family. Here, the relevance of Pye's theory is borne out by the manner in which the cultural concept of power has been appropriated to redefine and reinforce state authority. Just as the ideology extols the bonds of loyalty and duty to the family, these bonds are now extended to the nation-state, led by the paternalistic figure of Lee Kuan Yew, who is also significantly known as Singapore's founding father. As Li Shin explains to Esha, the concept of "guided democracy" means being "guided by the Prime Minister, who was head of PAP" (50).

Without doubt, the debate on freedom has been complicated in the past few decades as postcolonial nations like Malaysia and Singapore struggled to develop their countries after independence. As part of modernizing Asia, and therefore dependent on Western financial and technological might, Malaysia and Singapore were deeply ambivalent about Western democracy and its doctrine of liberty and autonomy, an ambivalence which also stemmed in part from the opposing ideological polemics that define cultural and religious differences between Asia and

the West (whose value-systems are mainly founded on democracy and Christianity). And to postcolonial nations, the new world order between "first world" and "third world" nations was especially grating in view of their colonial histories. It was therefore in Malaysia's and Singapore's interest to assert an independent identity by returning to their ethnic and cultural roots through the ideology of "Asian Values."[24]

In general, the term "Asian values" exhorts citizens to place communal harmony and social order above individual interests, as well as to view individual rights as an inherently self-centred and "decadent" Western discourse, and therefore undesirable.[25] The leaders of Malaysia and Singapore also argued that Western democracy was incompatible with Asian cultures that traditionally upheld the interests of the community. Furthermore, good governance and a stable economy, rather than human rights, were far more relevant and beneficial to developing nations. By appealing to people's anxieties and fears of disintegrating traditional values and cultural identity, based simply on the inversed image of the West as negative Other, the expression of "Asian values" thus achieved two critical goals; while the term involved an "imagining that other Asian peoples would identify with [...] a hybrid Asian ideology of resistance to Western domination" (de Bary 2), it simultaneously affirmed the inventive and powerful articulations of national sovereignty and cultural identities through the concept of "Asian-style" democracy.

Caught in the clash of ideologies between Asia and the West, tradition and modernity, family/communal duty and individual freedom, English language writers revealed a different kind of anxiety in their writings: the ambivalence and challenges of negotiating identity and voice in a changing world where the limits of freedom have been redefined through the "guided" discourses of the nation. In *Fistful of Colours*, Singaporean writer Suchen Christine Lim deftly recreates the tensions and complexities that infuse the individual struggle for identity and freedom during the early 1990s. The female protagonist, Suwen, is deeply ambivalent about her subject-position in the revised state narratives where "Asian values" dominate. As a Singaporean subject, she is informed about the "dangers of Westernization," and that she "should not adopt Western practices which contradict our Oriental moral concepts" (8), which include "dress[ing] outrageously" (9) and "speaking English or Singlish" (9). And as a subject of Chinese descent, Suwen is expected to have a sense of "Chinese identity and history" (9) as well as know the Chinese language: "Chinese

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[24] In Singapore, the dominant ethnic group, the Chinese, and their Confucian ethics became the driving force behind the political rhetoric of "Asian values" during the 1980s and 1990s. In Malaysia, the reverse is observed, as the expression of "Asian values" reflects Malay power and is thus Islamic in character.

[25] According to William T. de Bary, the polemical discourse of "`individualistic West' versus `communitarian Asia'" (8) is premised on Asia's view of the West as the source of social ills: "The very social problems attributed to the `individualistic West'—violence, crime, drug and sex abuse, and breakdown of family life, to name only the most obvious—attend the modernization process wherever it goes, in East or West" (8).

should speak Chinese" (83). By pursuing the liberal stance on individual freedom, Suwen is deeply critical about the state definitions of Chinese purity, which she perceives is an interventionist strategy: "Why should I let the authorities define who I am?" (217). At the same time however, her assertion of independence through resistance is undermined by niggling doubts of her own ethnic identity: "I was born ethnically Chinese. I grow up speaking English. Am I not Chinese still? Or am I just half Chinese? Not because of a physical change but because of a language change" (82-83).

Suwen's ambivalence and uncertainty emerge from a series of self-comparisons; as she confides in her Scottish friend Mark: "I feel very Chinese when I'm with you. But when I talk to Madam Tan Ai Mee in college, I feel that I'm not Chinese enough. I don't know much about Chinese customs and traditions. And I don't speak Mandarin" (216). It is by comparing herself to "true" subjects like Madam Tan that Suwen is made aware of her own lack in terms of cultural knowledge and language, a lack which she uses to justify the loss of her racial identity—"I'm not Chinese enough." Bound by the tropes of culture and nation, Suwen's body is subjected to and disciplined by the signifying gaze that defines her as Singaporean Chinese. But because she fails to fulfil the language criterion posed by the label "Singaporean Chinese," Suwen is made conscious of her behavioural deviance through the Confucian gaze: "I am seen as being tainted. [...] Tainted in the eyes of people like Madam Tan" (217). Unable to accept the state's homogenizing vision of Chinese purity, and unable to fully realize the Western ideals of individual freedom, Suwen's paralysis of agency and voice is, to a certain degree, an indictment of the uncompromising dichotomies produced by Singapore as well as by Western liberalism. Hence, the novel can also be understood as a subversive, albeit understated, treatise on the "split" experiences of the gendered subject as she oscillates between the binary signs that permeate the discourse of identity (whether perpetuated by the local government or by the West), and the tropes of ambivalence and difference engendered in the social space of the performative.

As an ideology, freedom will always be associated with the liberal ideal of the individual right, but the complex material realities encountered in the plural societies of Malaysia and Singapore have complicated this ideal. Freedom emerges as a discursive product that has to be negotiated from the boundaries in place, be it social, cultural or even political contexts. Furthermore, the different ways in which writers react and respond depend not only on individual experiences of time and space, but also on personal desires and notions of identity and selfhood. Some writers decide to migrate to places that are more conducive and accommodating to their personal visions of freedom. Others have chosen to stay on and grapple with the complex realities of nation building and development. While Ee and Kee are conscious of their roles as political critics, Yap and Thumboo are more ambivalent about national politics; they perceive that

the writer or poet should be detached from the articulations of the state and its ideology. Chuah on the other hand, has accepted her position in the race narratives of Malaysia and insists there are no prohibitions to hold one back from writing in English: "If you want to write in English, you just write in English and don't worry about national recognition" (Interview). As for the younger generation of writers who arrived on the literary scene in the 1980s and 1990s, they have to negotiate between the liberal ideal and the practice of freedom in their Asian and multi-racial contexts. If the paradoxical and conflicting interpretations of freedom above have proven anything, it is that there is no collective consensus on the definition of freedom. These varied opinions not only reflect the varying degrees of subject positions and subjectivities, but they also stress that the tropes of freedom, and by extension, censorship, are caught up in the transformative processes of modernization in the postcolonial era. Ideas of freedom and censorship are thus invested with ambivalence, as English language writers attempt to mediate self and identity within the blurred socio-political boundaries that define the modern nation-states of Malaysia and Singapore.

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