

Class and the Time of the Nation in Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*

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Abstract: Beginning with the complex relationship between the nation-state and cosmopolitanism in postcolonial studies and the profound imbrication in those complexities of the novel as a genre, this essay suggests that the doubled and in part reversed narrative structure of Preeta Samarasan's novel of Malaysia, *Evening Is the Whole Day* (2008), offers a reflection upon the capacities and limitations of the novel in imagining the nation and its potential in the decades following independence. While the novel's two narratives can be read first of all through Homi Bhabha's conceptions of the pedagogical and the performative, the reversal of the performative narrative also recalls the backward gaze of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, suggesting that the narrative significance of the moment (and the figure) upon which the novel gazes depends above all on questions of class. As a result, Samarasan's novel poses a challenge to the way *both* pedagogical and performative conceptions of nation and novel, in their explicit or implicit historicism, occlude such questions. The cosmopolitan mobility frequently offered as an alternative to the troubled nation and its exclusivist discourses of "race" is thus shown to be itself inadequate for a figure who has been excluded from family, nation, and mobility.

Keywords: class, Preeta Samarasan, *Evening Is the Whole Day*, Homi K. Bhabha, Walter Benjamin

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

—Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History"

The status of the nation in postcolonial studies has been falling, it seems safe to say, for some time. Writing in 1990, Timothy Brennan said, “[W]e often hear that nationalism is dead” (“[d]espite explosive independence struggles in the Philippines, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, and dozens of other places”) (45)—and by 2006 Simon Gikandi could say that postcolonial theory “has come to present itself as cosmopolitan in character and ambition, and transcendental of the nation and the national narrative,” celebrating “a double marginality,” both of “those who have been disadvantaged in relation to the institutions of the modern West and those who are marginalized, or self-marginalized, from the nations that succeeded the colonial empires” (69, 70). Yet given that the capacities of transnational solidarity groups to resist globalized capital are thus far limited, a more complex understanding of the current relationship between the national and the cosmopolitan has been called for. Pheng Cheah, for example, suggests that “both discourses have progressive as well as reactionary dimensions” (30) and that at this historical juncture “national mobilization” (265), like Brennan’s “defensive nationalism” (46), remains important. A popularly renationalized or “relegitimized” (Beverley 153) state, that is, may offer a defense against global capital and serve as a phase between the bourgeois nation-state and a socialist cosmopolitanism (Cheah 28). Homi Bhabha, too, earlier a celebrant of migrancy and the transnational, has more recently argued that “the ‘free movement’ of people and goods . . . cannot credibly support a ‘global ethic’ at a time when, according to the most recent estimates, only 3 percent of the world’s population are part of global migratory flows” (“Statement” 346). He goes on to say that the global “only comes to life as a representational reality when the nation-space *cedes* its sovereignty in order to *accede* to the transnational or global reality that embeds itself, or *intercedes*, into the ongoing life of the nation” (348; emphasis in original). In other words, the global thus far at least can operate only within the space of, and with the collaboration of, the nation itself.

The postcolonial novel in English participates in the same complex relationship between national and transnational, given the paradoxical emphasis on nation implicit in its role as “native informant” to an international readership (Huggan 27) and even the possibility that some

postcolonial novels might function as a national form only *from* a position of exile—simultaneously acknowledging, and yet marking their alienation from, the nation (Brennan 63). Such writing may on one hand remain “embedded in certain local economies of representation” (Holden, “Global” 56), whereby a novel about Malaysia, for instance, even though published and widely reviewed elsewhere, may be read differently by those with local knowledge—as Preeta Samarasan has asked a blog poster, “What’s a national narrative, and how can you know if this book is or not when you know nothing about Malaysia?” (Singh). Yet on the other hand writing in English and being published in New York or London may also allow authors to evade the constraints imposed by governments even as their writing operates within those representational economies. Perhaps for all these reasons, a number of writers in the last two decades, themselves often born after independence, have been able more openly to address what Gikandi calls the “nadir” of decolonization, “that important yet invisible space between colonialism and its transcendence, a nadir located somewhere between 1945 and 1975” (70). This was a period during which newly independent countries underwent what Shamsul A. B. has called “second-generation nationalism” (26), whereby nations that had only recently achieved independence and that had asserted a national homogeneity during anticolonial struggles came under pressures from claims of heterogeneity within, whether of class, caste, ethnicity, or region, including, for example the 1971 JVP and later Tamil insurgencies depicted in Romesh Gunesekeera’s *Reef* (1994), the 1967 Naxalite insurgency depicted in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), the 1967–71 Biafran War depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and the 1971 creation of Bangladesh depicted in Shehryar Fazli’s *Invitation* (2011).

In Malaysia, similar pressures were evident in the events surrounding 13 May 1969, when opposition election successes (among parties divided largely along ethnic lines) were met with violence in Kuala Lumpur. Yet though a number of recent Malaysian novels in English—for example Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother* (2002), Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), and Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The*

Garden of Evening Mists (2012)—have been explicitly historical, moving freely between the late nineteenth century and the period surrounding World War II, novels are only now beginning to address the more recent history of independent Malaysia, as does for example Dipika Mukherjee's *Thunder Demons* (2011), set in a twenty-first-century Malaysia hurtling toward Wawasan (or Vision) 2020. The events of May 1969 and their aftermath, in particular, have rarely figured directly in Malaysian novels, though they motivated the self-exile of a number of writers (see Pillai) and form the subtext of Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976)—despite that novel's setting in 1950s Singapore—as well as the prelude to the dystopic police state of his *Green Is the Colour* (1993) and the backdrop to Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001). Thus Preeta Samarasan's 2008 novel *Evening Is the Whole Day* is important not only because it represents what Salil Tripathi has called “the first serious attempt” to address the events of 1969 and their aftermath since *Green Is the Colour* (101) but also because it does so via the domestic novel still prominent in the global literary marketplace. In the process the novel, I will suggest, reflects on its own representational capacities (and by implication those of other such novels as well) vis-à-vis imaginings of the nation and its potential. By means of its doubled and in part reversed narrative structure, its numerous allusions both to other novels and to theorists of nation and narrative, and even its construction of a micro-novel within itself that replicates in miniature important aspects of the larger narrative, *Evening Is the Whole Day* draws painstakingly close attention to how national narratives are constructed and naturalized and to the sorts of exclusions and betrayals that made postcolonial studies turn away from nationalism to begin with. Moreover, rather than celebrating exile or cosmopolitanism as an alternative to the troubled nation, it directs our attention, via this complex narrative structure, to a classed figure, the servant girl Chellam, who is both excluded from the nation and left behind by cosmopolitan mobility as well.

Narrating the Nation: Pedagogical and Performative

The novel explicitly aligns the family story at its center with the Malaysian national story in a number of ways; at the same time, its nar-

rative—once the events of 1969 and their aftermath have brought one narrative strand to an end—focuses with almost microscopic attention on the events of a single year in the life of that one family, events moreover seen for the most part through the eyes of its six-year-old daughter. These two narrative trajectories, in addition to their different scales, are furthermore reversed temporally: the novel's fifteen chapters are divided between ten dated chapters, written in the present tense, that move backward in time during one year from September 1980 to September 1979, and five undated ones, written in the past tense, that move forward from 1899 to 1978. This doubled narrative and its foregrounding of temporality suggest that this novel, like many recent novels in Judith Ryan's view, lives in "intertwined coexistence" (210) with theory, in this case theorists of nation and narration such as Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. Even more powerfully, its backward-facing chapters and its attention to the betrayed servant girl Chellam recall Walter Benjamin, to whom (along with Theodor Adorno) Samarasan alludes by name in chapter 4 (and whose conceptions of time are of course employed by both Anderson and Bhabha), and invoke Benjamin's backward-looking angel of history ("On the Concept" 392) to challenge not only the historicism fundamental to the pedagogical national narrative but its potential inherence in the performative as well.

Though Bhabha's conceptions of the pedagogical and the performative are not neatly assimilable to formal qualities, they nonetheless offer a way of reading the doubling of the narrative in *Evening Is the Whole Day* that might be productive. The five undated chapters, though they are the lesser part of the novel in page length, suggest Bhabha's conception of "pedagogical" narration (*Location* 145): narration that attempts to construct the nation as moving forward "as one" through what Benjamin calls the "homogeneous, empty time" of ineluctable progress ("On the Concept" 395). These undated chapters provide just such a large-scale historical background to the events of the more narrowly focused dated chapters, describing as they do the milestones that shape the dominant family's history and by extension that of Malaysia: immigration, education, economic development, the coming of independence, and aspirations for full participation in the new nation. The

Rajasekharan family history is identified with the history of the nation above all via the metaphor of the “Big House,” with which Tata, the first Malaysian-born son of the family, intends to “declare his family’s stake in the new country” (18) and within which he lights a chandelier at precisely the moment of Merdeka, Malaysian independence from Britain:

Tata put the index finger of his right hand to the switch, took a deep breath, and flicked it on. At exactly midnight on the thirty-first of August 1957, there was Light . . .

. . . at precisely the same moment as, two hundred hopeful miles away, Tunku Abdul Rahman raised his right arm high on a colonial cricket ground and saluted the country’s new freedom[. . .]. There, too, was Light. (25)

The hope that fills the first few years of Tata’s son Raju’s marriage, too, is marked by Raju’s celebrating his own first-born child’s fifth birthday “almost as lavishly as the nation, just turned ten, had feted its impressive progress since independence” (106). In Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,” “homogeneous, empty time” is the time of historicism, which naturalizes history as “automatic,” an “inevitable” progression toward a future to which all desires or dissatisfactions will be addressed (394–95) as long as labor also “progresses” in its mastery of nature (393)—and just so the hopeful Tata tells his wife and his first-born son, Raju, “*It’s our country, not the white man’s. . . . Just work hard and the world could belong to you here*” (18; emphasis in original). This pedagogical narrative reaches its climax in chapter 7, “Power Struggles,” in which another child, Raju’s son Suresh, is born in Kuala Lumpur in the midst of the violence of May 13. In the aftermath, Raju is forced to relinquish any dreams he has had of full political participation in the nation and at the chapter’s end he bitterly apostrophizes his long-dead grandfather, who, he says, “*should’ve stayed far, far away*” from the “*bloody boat*” that brought him to Malaya: “*In India I would’ve had a real chance*” (135; emphasis in original).

It could be argued, in fact, that even these forward-moving, undated chapters are also themselves performative in Bhabha’s sense—disruptive, that is, of the nation speaking “as one”—since, even as they reiterate the

pedagogical narrative of national development and progress, they do so in the person of an immigrant and his descendants, raising the question of what defines a nation and foregrounding a historical and contemporary split in the Malaysian national discourse. This is a discourse divided between claims of multiculturalism (claims that the nation is formed by contract among all those who participate in its construction) and claims that the nation is formed on the basis of blood or language, as seen in the insistence on the special status of ethnic Malays enshrined in the constitution at independence.¹ As Sharmani Patricia Gabriel has put it,

[a]lthough the Malaysian state has put in place a policy of multiculturalism . . . members of the Malay race are accorded special privileges on the grounds that it is they who constitute the nation's *bumiputera* community [literally "princes of the soil"]. . . . Indeed, it is the nationalist construction of the hierarchical dichotomy between the "indigenous" *bumiputera* and the "immigrant" *pendatang* (Malay for "newly arrived") that has been responsible for the persistent deferral of the status of "national" to Malaysians of immigrant origins and to their cultural constructions. ("Diasporic" 24)

Samarasan's text further challenges the conventions even of multicultural representations of the nation by focusing on a single ethnicity (indeed a single family) in lieu of a "roll-call" range of ethnicities; yet questions of the representativeness of any one family or even individual also raise the question of the nation as a nation, in which "the people" must be indivisible, and any part thus as representative as (though not identical to) any other. Samarasan's writing the Malaysian story from a minority position might be seen as a rhetorical move, then, that further activates what Bhabha has termed the "ambivalence" of the pedagogical discourse of the nation, whose constitutive structure as "out of many, one" is at the same time split between addresser and addressee: "The people are neither the beginning nor the end of the national narrative [neither solely addresser nor addressee, that is]; they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the 'social' as homogeneous, consensual community, and the forces that signify the more specific ad-

dress to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population" (*Location* 145). What is interesting, then, is less the question of how numerically typical or representative any given subject might be than what that subject enables or activates within the contestations that make up the national address.²

It is suggestive in this regard, too, that the family patriarch has not built the Big House from scratch but (like Ahmed Sinai in *Midnight's Children*) bought it from a departing colonizer, in this case the "dyspeptic Scotsman" McDougall: rather than offering an originary space for the new nation, then, the Malaysian national house is still haunted by its colonial history, just as it is literally haunted by the ghost of McDougall's murdered half-Chinese daughter. This colonial history is moreover still active in the events of May 1969:

[E]very man, Chinese, Indian, and Malay, forgot his contempt for the views of the departed British and savored the taste of his old master's stereotypes. *Coolie*, they hissed. *Village idiot fed on sambal petai*. *Slit-eyed pig eater*. They'd been given a vocabulary, and now, like all star pupils, they were putting it to use. (121; emphasis in original)

Given the argument that the British not only left this vocabulary of stereotypes but that they had actually constructed these groupings out of the multifarious linguistic, regional, familial, and religious affiliations of the Malayan population—for example in their censuses (Bayly and Harper 332; Anderson 164–65)—for a novel to deploy those same groupings in an attempt to be representative would be to accede to categories constructed by the British to begin with. Such an attempt would also run the risk that "in the process of drawing boundaries between groups," as Arif Dirlik points out, it would "erase differences within them" (1364), differences such as age, gender, and, as I have suggested, class.

Thus even as the undated chapters constitute a form of pedagogy, it is a pedagogy already being questioned from within those chapters themselves, as well as in their chiasmatic crossing by the dated, present-tense chapters that throw time into reverse and stand in stark contrast

to family chronicles punctuated by national events that only naturalize the inevitable development of both. In fact it is not until three chapters from the end of the novel that we are given one last undated chapter, “What Uncle Ballroom Saw,” that brings the story up to 1978, roughly a year before the earliest of the dated chapters, dated 8 September 1979. This final undated chapter may seem at first glance to be a postscript to the national narrative of immigration, hard work, and success (which we have already seen driven off the rails in 1969), traveling as it does into the story of Raju’s affair with “the char kuay teow lady” and his incestuous impulse toward his sixteen-year-old daughter, Uma, when his lover’s husband returns from China and his world seems to be disintegrating. Yet the recurrence of the trope of incest, either imagined or realized, in this and other postcolonial novels (*Midnight’s Children* and *The God of Small Things*, for example) may suggest a meditation on the implications of the ethnic and religious communalism that troubles their nations and the ever-more-self-enclosed endogamy that might result. Though Raju’s incestuous impulse toward Uma occurs nine years after May 1969, it also occurs at the moment when his interethnic affair with his Chinese Malaysian lover has been threatened by the reassertion of intraethnic authority by her Chinese husband and thus might constitute a trope of the ethnic self-enclosure into which Malaysian communal politics has led. The political here is indeed personal, and the trope of incest the vanishing point of the national narrative as such.

If the undated chapters lay claim, then, to their own narrative of the Malaysian nation, this final moment not only calls the pedagogical national narrative itself into question but is also belatedly seen to have generated a different narrative trajectory altogether, one that might be even more clearly aligned with the performative. Bhabha defines the performative as “a process of signification” that in lieu of “any prior or originary presence of the nation-people” (*Location* 145) instead demonstrates the nation’s contemporary, day-to-day coming into being through recursion, iteration, and difference—difference that both enables and defers meaning in the processes of signification and thus of subject formation. And in *Evening Is the Whole Day* it is the oppressive force generated by the pedagogical narrative itself that generates a performa-

tive counternarrative. We have seen that Raju's incestuous impulse—an uncontrolled response to the compound miseries of his personal and political existence since 1969—is the culmination and vanishing point of the national macronarrative. Yet it is also the point at which that macronarrative begins to generate the micronarratives of 1979–1980, dated chapters that disrupt and undermine just those features linking the novel to a national pedagogy of progress. In these chapters time and causality are stalled and denaturalized, and the confident overview of the undated chapters, which cover nearly eighty years in five chapters, is replaced by an obsessive series of close-ups so granular as to render perspective and judgment nearly impossible. The quite different temporality, focalization, and scale of these dated chapters offer a prolonged view of the damage done to figures subaltern to the nation, specifically child and servant, by the thwarting of the pedagogical narrative; and, whereas the perspective of the child enacts the coming into being of the national subject, the figure of the servant stands at the limit of the nation and embodies its lost potential.

One of the most striking differences between these chapters and the undated ones is that the dated ones are written in present tense, literalizing not a narrative that moves reliably forward from an originary moment in the past but what Bhabha describes as “that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process” (*Location* 145). As Benjamin has put it, too, the historian “cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which [she herself] is writing history” (“On the Concept” 396). The use of the present tense here, in other words, is one of the methods the novel uses to draw attention to, and problematize, its own—and the nation's—ongoing construction. The fact that a large proportion of the narrative is focalized through the six-year-old daughter Aasha, moreover, compounds the effect of the present tense, as the child's unknowingness and naiveté perform the national subject also under construction. This is clearly a process in crisis: Aasha's relentless attempts to elicit a response from her deeply alienated older sister Uma (even over the course of more than

two years) register symptomatically the trauma in which the pedagogical narrative has culminated. And because the backward trajectory of these dated chapters is not carried down to the chapter or sentence level—people do not walk backward or regurgitate their food, and sentences proceed in normal word order—in effect the temporal regression from chapter to chapter, even as each internally moves forward in time in the normal narrative fashion (see Chatman 33), generates a proliferation of micronarratives that denaturalize the “homogeneous, empty time” of the pedagogical and suggest a temporality that is not “continuist [and] accumulative” but “repetitious, recursive” (Bhabha, *Location* 145) and, here, unavailing. Such micronarratives disable the construction of any master narrative that could consolidate them into an overarching meaning³ and result in a slowing and breaking down of any forward trajectory, here even a stalling into paralysis. Repeatedly in these chapters time itself seems to halt: as Aasha looks at a tear hanging on Uma’s chin, for example, “the more Aasha looks at it, the more it doesn’t fall. Pictures move inside it,” pictures of the grandmother’s death that has destroyed the family (42). Similarly, when her brother Suresh is asked to bring a glass of ice water from the refrigerator he thinks, looking at his mother:

What has happened *has* happened . . . and perhaps it doesn’t really matter who made it happen. Time to let go, move on, or just *move*, but suddenly he can’t; he grips the glass ever more tightly, until he can feel it on the brink of shattering in his fingers. . . .

“Suresh,” says [Raju], “what is this? Are you having a catatonic fit? Are you pretending to be a broken robot?” (75; emphasis in original)

Concomitant with the slowing and even frozen forward movement of these dated chapters is a lateral proliferation of what the novel terms “bluff” (or illicit) families and domestic violence across the national landscape, performatively ironizing the logic of simultaneity, of what one’s compatriots are doing “meanwhile,” that, according to Anderson, distinguishes the modern imagination of the nation from the divine omnitemporality of an earlier world (24–26). This proliferation also

further foregrounds the fictiveness of the nation: violence enters the novel via the cases Raju, as public prosecutor, must pursue, and in each case his job is to exercise his talents as a “master storyteller” (328) to win (literal) conviction, suggesting that his role after the frustrations of 1969 is still to participate in the construction of the nation, as he had hoped, but now as a mere ventriloquist for a pedagogical narrative of justice that papers over the (literal) “chopping up” of the national being. Each case also parallels, and speaks to, the situation of a different member of the Rajasekharan family: Siti Mariam’s murder of her mother-in-law to the angry daughter-in-law Vasanthi, the murder of ten-year-old Angela Lim to the traumatized six-year-old Aasha, and the adulterous violence of the Curry Murderess to the adulterous Raju himself, culminating in the injustice of Raju’s greatest accomplishment, the conviction of Shamsuddin bin Yusoff for Angela Lim’s murder, which parallels the framing of the family servant Chellam for the grandmother Paati’s death and (simultaneously with Uma’s departure) ends the novel. The omniscient narration of the realist novel Anderson describes, and what Bhabha has called “the rationalist and progressivist logics of the ‘canonical’ nation” (*Location* 153), are also supplemented in these dated chapters by forms of knowledge unavailable in the undated ones: for instance, Suresh sees the flames of the char kuay teow seller’s wok dancing in Raju’s glasses even as they lie on his library table later; Aasha is regularly visited not only by the ghost of Paati after her death but also by the ghost of Mr. McDougall’s daughter (whom her Malaysian mother killed along with herself when Mr. McDougall left Malaysia with his “real” wife and daughters); and nightmares have predictive power, as when Aasha dreams of the suicide of another “bluff wife,” their neighbor Kooky Rooky, who does in fact kill herself at the end of the novel.

A cumulative result of these narrative reversals, halts, and parallels, as well as of the proliferation of the violent and the nonrational, is that any clear line of causality is thrown into question, and this is perhaps deliberate. Samarasan has said that while the “disappointment and apathy that stemmed from the 1969 riots . . . very directly [set] off a chain of events in the novel,” she feared that “it was too direct a suggestion of

cause and effect, not that it was too apolitical” (Singh), demonstrating that the loss of pedagogical coherence in the performative may be as often the result of repression or negation as of active contestation. While the events can be reconstructed in chronological order retrospectively—from Raju’s frustration, to Uma’s (and later Chellam’s own) alienation, to Aasha’s emotional abandonment by both Uma and Chellam, to Paati’s death and Aasha’s accusation of Chellam, and finally to Uma’s departure and Chellam’s expulsion—the chapters’ tracking backward from one departure, death, or betrayal to another means that our understanding of causality is always deferred or belated, and only the damage is before us as we read. Even where causality can be identified, moreover, as in the excruciatingly drawn-out events that culminate in the death of Paati, it is so complex and so unpredictable as to appear chaotic. Yet in chaos theory what appears chaotic may not be so, and the novel seems to signal as much with the recurrent appearance of fantastic butterflies and butterflies’ wings at crucial moments—both a traditional harbinger of change (even death) and the conventional image of chaotic complexities, “order *masquerading* as randomness,” after it was first used by Edward Lorenz (Gleick 22; emphasis in original). Chapter 8 opens with the most remarkable example: “On the day Paati dies, a black butterfly finds its way into the Big House. It’s the biggest butterfly Aasha has ever seen: each wing is the size of [Vasanthi’s] palm, with trailing teardrop tails” (136). The significance of the butterfly is further emphasized by Aasha’s reaction: not only is she overcome by panic, but her thoughts specifically focus on time and causation: “all she can think, though the words make no sense to her at this moment, is *too late too late too late*. Is someone else too late to save Aasha, or is she too late for some unknown but crucial engagement? She doesn’t know, she cannot know” (137; emphasis in original). And, indeed, Paati’s death itself—from a fall in the bathroom—requires an almost incredible concatenation of paths that don’t quite cross, communications not quite heard, communications heard but not meant to be heard, and accidents and impulses that taken alone would have had little effect (Chellam’s taking an extra minute to hang some rags on the clothesline, for instance), but which taken together are fatal to Paati and ultimately to Chellam herself.

Yet among these simultaneously masked and elaborated causalities within the dated chapters, one crossing of their trajectory with that of the undated ones makes a significant connection between the two: the chapter in which Paati dies, “What Aasha Saw,” comes immediately after Raju’s bitter disillusionment post-1969, a juxtaposition at the center of the novel that suggests a relationship between the two events despite the gap of eleven years and the whole tissue of intervening events. That the death at the center of the novel is that of Paati, Raju’s mother, moreover, focuses attention on a logic of exclusion that she represents and that permeates both domestic and national narratives. The connections made here even across these intervening chapters and years suggest that, though the performative interrupts the would-be seamless narrative of national progress, the result is not thereby a historical free-for-all; the historian must recognize causality, not as historicism’s passive, merely “additive” procedure, as Benjamin puts it, but actively, “constructively,” even “posthumously . . . through events that may be separated . . . by thousands of years” (“On the Concept” 397). The causality identified with Paati, then, via this particular textual construction, is a Malayan collusion with colonialist logics that continues into the post-independence period, as we have already seen demonstrated in other ways in the events of 1969. For instance, though Raju believes that he is acting with admirable unconventionality in courting the lower-middle-class Vasanthi, the beautiful but awkward daughter of the clerk next door, the novel suggests otherwise from the very beginning of their relationship, showing him planning to construct a brick wall between their two houses at the very moment he is asking her father for permission to court her. And, indeed, the wall never comes down—Paati lets Vasanthi know from the beginning of the marriage that her taste in saris is questionable, that her education is inadequate, and that Raju has more interesting friends to see at his club; and once Uma is born she becomes Paati’s alone, as Raju allows his mother to turn even his own daughter against Vasanthi and participates in shutting her out of their word games and witticisms. Though Paati’s contempt for the lower-middle-class Vasanthi is the stuff of the conventional “saas-bahu” Indian soap opera (an even more violent version of which appears in the

Siti Mariam story mentioned earlier), what Raju calls her “nineteenth-century mentality” (66) is associated strongly with her admiration for all things British, not only in her affair with her husband’s British boss but in her regret at the British departure in 1957 (she has to be roused from sleep for the moment of independence).

Thus a logic of exclusion permeates the family story, and it is Uma’s rage at Paati’s failure to protect her, even more than at Raju’s caressing her, that traumatizes the family and leaves Aasha, “little coal mine canary” (232), to attempt to make things right. It is in this process that the novel’s concerns emerge most clearly: that Aasha turns unerringly on Chellam in her attempts to restore the family—“Chellamservant *pushed* Paati,” she “hisses” at the crucial moment (158)—links Chellam’s fate to the similar framing of Shamsuddin bin Yusoff, reopening the novel’s domestic concerns to the national. The ethnic diversity introduced into Malaya by the British is often identified as the cause of the divisions in post-independence Malaysia that culminated in the events of 1969; yet the twinning in this novel of the fates of Shamsuddin bin Yusoff and Chellam suggests that among all its multifarious “scraps, patches and rags of daily life” (Bhabha, *Location* 145), the novel reiterates a persistent concern with class, and it is *this* product of colonialism, acceded to by the post-independence state but mystified by discourses of “race,” that haunts the narrative.

The figure of Shamsuddin, of all of those outside the family, refers most pointedly to this concern with class: though he is “a Malay, a Bumiputera, a prince made of Malaysia’s own fertile earth” (222), he is still shown to be vulnerable on socioeconomic grounds. It is true that the national discourse is racialized, as we learn via the Andersonian medium of the newspaper:

On the front page of [Raju’s] newspaper . . . the Minister of Internal Security has urged the public not to turn the case into a Racial Issue. (But on the letters to the editor page, that public continues to sneak their subtle defiance past the tea-break-heavy eyes of the censors: in pointed comparisons to past murder trials, in disingenuously philosophical nature-

versus-nurture meditations, in dry discussions of urban demographics.) (73)

And Shamsuddin's framing has been enabled in the first place by what the narrator identifies as the widespread practice, after 1969, of the "patriotic skills of selective blindness, deafness, and muteness" (243), when his ID is "filched" by a Chinese boy in front of everyone on a bus. Yet when Shamsuddin's wife claims that he has indeed been framed, "paradoxically and obediently, [the spectators in court] imagine the framers" (79), and they do so in terms of class: "fat men, rich men, men wearing dark glasses in the back seats of Mercedes Benzes, with thick curly hair on their forearms. Sultans' sons, ministers' brothers, industrialists with cushy government contracts" (79). In fact, though his framing has been sheerly opportunistic, and the case against him weak in the extreme, the public imagination is correct: he is expendable even to the system of justice, and "the jury and the judge are on someone's secret payroll" (169). Aasha, too, in mulling over the national conversation about "What *kind* of man this Shamsuddin is"—"because the question of *kind* rises to the surface of every conversation" (73)—goes immediately to markers of class: "As far as Aasha can tell, Shamsuddin is a skinny kind of man in a cheaply made bush jacket" who "looks as if he might have bad teeth" (74). And Aasha's meditations on class are linked very soon after to thoughts of Chellam: "Chellam . . . was just that *kind*. Whatever *kind* Shamsuddin was, Chellam was almost as bad" (76).

Similarly, the logic of Paati's assaults on Vasanthi's taste, her education, and her mores, which position Vasanthi as a thinly disguised "estate girl," or rubber-tapper's daughter, within the household, inevitably devolves finally, via Aasha, upon Chellam, the one actual estate girl within the household, and thrusts her out. Chellam's role then suggests that the novel is concerned not only with the social and political forms of exclusion fostered by a racialized national discourse, to which the Rajasekharans have been subjected, but also with deeper structural logics of exploitation that operate across and within "racial" categories and render the position of the laborer in the postcolonial nation particularly uncertain. This uncertainty may even render the laborer state-

less: whereas Shamsuddin's identity card is stolen, Chellam, as Dashini Jeyathurai notes (311–12), has “no birth cettificayte” to begin with (Samarasan 335). Nor is a cosmopolitan mobility, itself a response to discourses of “race,” a possibility for Chellam; it is, significantly, Aasha's rage at Uma's own prospective mobility—her imminent departure for Columbia University—and her guilt over having let that rage, as she imagines, alienate Uma permanently, that turns on the figure of Chellam, a figure excluded from the household, from the nation, *and* from the possibilities of such mobility. And while it must be said that *Evening Is the Whole Day*, like many domestic novels, still displaces issues of class *as such* (i.e., the extraction of surplus value from labor) onto these corollary issues of social vulnerability and abjection (Chellam's framing and expulsion from the household), its complex narrative structure denaturalizes the very novelistic discourse that could smooth over these displacements and foregrounds that discourse's operations.

The Unnarratable: Chellam

The novel works in two apparently contradictory ways in regard to Chellam: on one hand its bracketing of the dated chapters with her departure and her arrival (followed only by Uma's departure at the very end) and the way she is positioned in Aasha's mind as Uma's double suggest that she is a significant figure within the narrative; at the same time, however, only rarely is the narrative focalized through her in any significant way. And while this is true of Uma as well—a parallel consistent with their being the two figures whom the nation cannot accommodate—whereas Uma's alienation is ultimately explained within the emotional logic of the novel, Chellam's exclusion seems more deeply structural. There are chapters called “What Aasha Saw” and “What Uncle Ballroom Saw,” for example, but a chapter that might plausibly be called “What Chellam Saw,” in which Chellam returns from the market to reveal the existence of Raju's “Chindian” bluff family to Vasanthi and the children, is called instead “The Unlucky Revelation of Chellam Newservant,” marking nicely her exclusion even from the focalization of the narrative in which she plays a part. Indeed, the only chapter that spends much time within Chellam's mind is one that might

seem extraneous to the narrative, “The God of Gossip Conquers the Garden Temple”—yet that apparent extraneity is suggestive, in that it calls attention to one of the key sites in which the novel comments on its own status as a novel and the limits of its capacity to accommodate a figure such as Chellam.

Evening Is the Whole Day calls attention to its own status as a novel in a number of ways, first of all through a self-conscious intertextuality: the novel alludes to or recalls in theme or form a whole range of novels, among them Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* and Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (in its treatment of a child who falsely accuses a vulnerable working-class figure), Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (in its alternating chapters with different points of view and different tenses) and *Great Expectations* (via the direct allusion of a chapter title), and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (not only in its trope of the Big House chandelier’s being lit at the moment of independence but also in a son’s birth at another key moment in national history). The novel thus interweaves its narrative with a range of external texts, calling attention to its own constructedness and the place it takes in a lineage of representations of class, nation, and history.

The novel further comments on its own representational capacities, and does so specifically vis-à-vis Chellam, by constructing a micro-novel within itself, via the figure of the “gossip god” Anand, a neighbor’s twenty-five-year-old nephew whose family has become convinced he has the gift of prophecy and begun to organize an annual gathering at which family and friends pay to hear their futures told. Anand thus figures in miniature the operations of the novel as a genre, drawing on narrative possibilities and constraints to construct futures for his characters, even doing so via a figure who duplicates the larger novel’s main focalizer, Aasha. Just as the dated chapters of *Evening Is the Whole Day* are largely focalized through the perspective of the six-year-old Aasha, that is, Anand’s prophecies are channeled through his own (now dead) five-year-old sister Amuda and furthermore set next to another scene of reading, Aasha’s trip to the library with Uma: “On Kingfisher Lane, Anand’s trance is in full swing by the time Uma and Aasha are in Children’s Fiction” (211).

Chellam's question for Anand, when it comes, specifically recalls the conventional plot of the nineteenth-century domestic novel Samarasan has otherwise alluded to in the examples of *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*: her question, "trimm[ed]" and "smooth[ed]" down to its essence, is simply "When will I marry?" Anand's response, based in part on the neighborhood's unfounded conviction that Chellam has been impregnated by Uncle Ballroom, is brutal but uncannily accurate, as the reader is already aware: "[Y]our only bridegroom will be four wooden planks and a roaring fire! . . . Yes, yes, he's coming for you very soon, that fiery bridegroom, no need to wait too long!" (216). That this is the promised denouement of Chellam's "novel" is particularly ironic given that she is far from being a figure of alterity inassimilable to the Malaysian nation, though the children despise her bodily presence, as Jeyathurai notes (312–14), and her "broken English" (Samarasan 252); in fact she ought to be fully assimilable and is potentially the ideal protagonist of the pedagogical narrative of development. Despite having been prostituted as a young girl to support her family, she has attempted to become the self-regulating subject of capital *par excellence*, carefully tallying her income and expenditures in a small notebook bought for the purpose, controlling her consumption in order to save for self-improvement (in the form of a pair of spectacles), and putting in extra work to sew on buttons or iron shirts for Uncle Ballroom in hopes of building her savings secretly—after it becomes clear that the Rajasekharans have no qualms about handing her entire salary over to her father each month. Nonetheless, what the pedagogical narrative has promised for such a figure will for Chellam clearly not be delivered; despite the historical affinity of the novel form with social mobility, in this novel it becomes clear that such mobility, conventionally accomplished via just such individual self-making as Chellam attempts, is irrelevant to larger structural forms of exploitation. As Benjamin has put it, celebrations of labor power alone as the key to progress fail to acknowledge "the retrogression of society," whereby, to paraphrase his quotation of Marx, "she who possesses no other property but her labor power will necessarily become the slave of others who have made themselves owners" ("On the Concept" 393). While Uma is finally enabled to go forward, then,

as promised in chapter 1—picking up the pedagogical trajectory that has moved forward through time as the novel progresses—Chellam goes backward, from the narrowing down to her imminent death that opens the book to the hopeful opening out of her life at the Big House near its end. The novel makes this narrative reversal explicit in chapter 14, when the narrator says, “Think of our telescoping tale as the opposite of an old-fashioned cartoon close: instead of the pitch black creeping in on Bugs Bunny from all directions, the light expands, and out there, before Chellam, stretches all of life” (320–21). *Evening Is the Whole Day* here denies its pedagogical narrative the power to regulate the novel’s overarching meaning; instead, having begun with expulsion and prospective death for its subaltern figure, Chellam, and then moved backward toward an inaugural moment filled with the light of her hopes, the novel recalls and yet interrogates the narrative of progress through “homogenous, empty time” that Anderson suggests is the time of the nation “glid[ing] into a limitless future” (12). Samarasan has said her aim was that “the seemingly trivial/happy things that take place at the beginning of that year (1979–1980) feel poignant/tragic” when they appear after we have learned what happens later (Stameshkin), and such “sustained episodic” reversal is a familiar technique, as Seymour Chatman points out (34); yet in this novel the reversal serves above all to challenge historicist temporalities of the nation and the classed ideologies that underpin them.

Indeed, in its backward movement the novel may even challenge the historicism potential in Bhabha’s notion of the performative itself. Despite understanding the performative as a Derridean supplement that “adds to” without “adding up” (to something new and better, that is) (*Location* 161), and insisting that it “*keeps alive the making of the past*” (254; emphasis in original), Bhabha’s model of performativity might be seen to risk the same reliance on the future that Benjamin excoriates, to the extent that it too naturalizes progress-in-time, though in the form of iteration with difference—“the repetition that will not return as the same” (Bhabha, *Location* 162)—to bring into being a better future. Gregor McLennan, for example, citing Chetan Bhatt, suggests that Bhabha’s “pitching of the One against the Other, in order to come out

with something new and Different Again, stands as the briefest tracing of the Hegelian dialectic” and its historicism (80–81). The problem is that Bhabha’s model fails to take ideology into account, in that its reliance on difference *as such* elides any commitment to specific forms of change. As John Beverley puts it, in Bhabha’s conception what enables resistance is the operation of signification itself, that is, “the ultimate undecidability of any act of meaning production,” which, coupled with the “epistemological privilege” intrinsic to subordination, offers the subordinated a way to see through the authority of power (99). Yet, as Beverley goes on to note, citing Althusser’s “Ideology has no outside,” the operations of signification alone are an insufficient basis for resistance: rather, “[t]he negation of the dominant ideology [must be] accompanied at the same time by the composition of *another ideology*” (100; emphasis in original) upon which a more egalitarian and less exploitive social order might be built. With specific reference to temporality and constructions of history, Keya Ganguly argues, similarly, that Bhabha’s valorization of difference as such “disavow[s]” the “class-inflected” analyses offered by the Frankfurt School, even as he cites Benjamin (174)—whereas in Benjamin’s own insistence on “appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” we can see that it is specifically *classed* memories (of “enslaved ancestors”) and the recognition of *classed* dangers that enable such an appropriation. Only such a recognition, according to Benjamin, can save the historian (and the novelist, and perhaps even the reader of novels) from “becoming a tool of the ruling classes” who waits placidly for the better future that will ineluctably arrive (“On the Concept” 394, 391).

The novel’s reversed narrative, like Benjamin’s angel of history (“On the Concept” 392), is thus unable to turn its back on the past, instead keeping its gaze on lost potentials that disallow the amelioration of conventional narrative closure (even tragic closure) and instead freeze time, keep catastrophe in view, and discomfit us by its call upon our admittedly “weak” (390) powers of redemption. The hope-filled moment of Chellam’s arrival, looking around her at a scene filled with light and figures in soft focus (albeit thanks to her myopia), is thus the climax of the novel rather than a moment long forgotten by the time a con-

ventionally ordered narrative might reach its denouement. Such a conventional chronology would allow only a sense that what was lost is irrevocably lost but that we will do better next time—the lure of historicism. Instead, the novel that Benjamin accuses of letting the reader “[warm] his shivering life with a death he reads about” (“Storyteller” 156) (having lost the recourse to the wit and cunning of the oppressed that was available to the storyteller), here gazes relentlessly backward in an attempt to replace remembrance—the novelistic closure that brings a poignant and pleasurable (if inexpressible) sense of “the meaning of life” (155–56)—with an insistent reopening of the question. It may be only in this way that this novel evades its own potential historicism, whether pedagogical *or* performative, and activates the possibility, as expressed in Bhabha’s (perhaps overly laudatory) words, that it is in the “unbeguiled, belated novelist” that “there emerges an ambivalence in the narration of modern society” (*Location* 161).

Chellam’s stepping onto Rajasekharan soil thus repeats in a minor key the first Rajasekharan’s stepping onto Malaysian soil in 1899, a trajectory resumed in the final chapter of the novel (the only dated chapter that picks up the forward trajectory of the undated ones) with Uma’s imagined stepping onto U.S. soil. Uma’s is a cosmopolitan mobility that, ironically, only resumes the forward trajectory of the pedagogical narrative in order to demonstrate that, as Bhabha’s 2004 “Statement” suggests, the fulfillment toward which it is moving must still realize itself in *some* (though other) nation; and this is a movement under the force of which her story becomes literally (if ironically) pedagogical, as the novel ends with Raju telling stories of “Uma Future” and her “Happily Ever After” to his wide-eyed Chindian children in Greentown.

In America, he says, his voice low with wonder (for this is the moral of his story, his grand conclusion), anything can happen.

You can go there a nobody, a no-name orphan, and tomorrow find yourself a United States senator.

You can go there starving and crippled, penniless and alone, and tomorrow find yourself a millionaire.

You can go there broken, and tomorrow find yourself whole.
(339)

Samarasan decided to cut parts of the novel that she had already written dealing with Uma's time in the United States (see Stameshkin), and the author's half-heartedness on this matter is productive, since it refuses to privilege the consolations of mobility—emblemized by Uma's abundantly (if not always wisely) packed suitcase—and instead keeps our gaze focused on Chellam, the one left behind, who has dragged her own (broken-wheeled, raffia-tied, nearly empty) suitcase the whole length of the novel, the narrator ironically says, “for our spectatorial pleasure” (320). By keeping our gaze turned back toward Chellam's arrival, the novel casts doubt on its own impulse toward what Dirlik has called “a search for salvation in the global capitalist economy, spearheaded by elites who were themselves the ‘hybridized’ products of colonialism,” and instead confirms Dirlik's suggestion that “the transnationalization of class structures with globalization brings forth the issue of class more insistently than ever” (“ironically,” he adds, “as class has practically disappeared from analysis”) (1375). Straining against and commenting upon its own status as a novel, then, *Evening Is the Whole Day* with its backward gaze suggests a story marked by class and devoid of the grandiosity of narrative and national meaning given (even in denied or displaced form) to that of the Rajasekharans. To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, in Chellam both novel and nation “mark, with uncanny clarity, the limits of [their] own discourse” (129).

Notes

- 1 See Harper 350–52. The novel's portrayal of the politics of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) may be shaped not only by the disillusionment of 1969 but also by the reemergence of this discourse as an appeal to less-privileged Malay constituencies by Malay political elites in the wake of the Asian financial crisis and the divergence in economic interests that it exposed. See Goh (216).
- 2 Gabriel and Holden make similar points about the recasting of Malaysian national discourses in the writing of K. S. Maniam, whose focus on a single community serves to interrogate “a historical narrative that divides migrants from natives” (Holden, “Communities” 60; see also Gabriel, “Diasporic” and “Nation”).
- 3 See, for example, the articles by Aravamudan and Holden (“Communities”) on the potential of the short story and other non-novelistic prose forms for post-colonial writing.

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