

## Drama

# *Extracts from* *“The Education of Miss Asia”*

ERNEST THALAYASINGAM MACINTYRE

**E**DITORS' NOTE: “The Education Of Miss Asia,” regarded as Ernest Macintyre’s most enduring play, was written in 1971 and had its first performance at the Lionel Wendt Theatre, Colombo, on 27 September 1971. It was performed in London (UK) at the Asia Institute Theatre, in 1979, and in Australia at the Playbox Theatre Melbourne, in 1980 (Macintyre notes that in this performance “all the actors were Anglo-Saxon but this mattered not to the performances”). The most recent performances were in September 1997, at the Peradeniya University Theatre and at the British Council Theatre in Colombo. It is Macintyre’s only play that has not been published (for various reasons of the author’s own making), so we are pleased to be able to make this extended extract available here.

Contextualizing it for *ARIEL*’s readers, Macintyre says: “What [the play] is supposed to be about is outrageously unlikely. Marlene Perera, a good-looking simpleton from suburban Colombo, Ceylon, is suddenly catapulted from her solid lower-middle-class family background into the insubstantial world of glittering beauty contests. She moves upward from Miss Ceylon to Miss Asia at the second round in Calcutta. She awaits the finals in London for Miss World. The waiting period is the time frame of the play. While she waits, she is tutored on “Asia” by a Calcutta University Professor (with the unlikely name of Raasagoola Chaudaribhoy) because she will be judged not only on her beauty but also (for the first time in such contests of the body) on her intellectual and emotional responses to the continent she represents (as all other contestants will be on their responses to their respective continents). But Chaudaribhoy’s

teaching on Asia ironically turns her the other way around: to reject beauty contests as she realizes the postcolonial tragedy in the Asian drama. Her developing missionary zeal is inextricable from her intense young emotional attachment to her guru. But in the dying moments of the play, Chaudaribhoy boldly declares himself to be a figment of the imagination, “only” a dramatic device from the *Natyasastra*, the famous ancient Indian text on drama. Miss Asia is returned pathetically if not tragically to extra theatrical reality, the world we live in when we are not at a theatre performance. Paradoxically, the shattering of illusion by overtly theatrical means deepens the involvement of the audience. The extract that follows “happens” not long after the performance has begun; Chaudaribhoy is about to take position on stage for the first time.”

*(Marlene Perera—Miss Asia—is in conversation with her fiancé, Ranjit. At this point Hector, Miss Asia’s father, pops his head in.)*

HECTOR: Prof. Chaudaribhoy should be here very soon, and you have six more pages of the *Encyclopaedia Asiana*.

MARLENE: Daddy please, I’m talking to Ranjit. Damn the *Encyclopaedia Asiana* and damn Chaudaribhoy.

*(At this point Chaudaribhoy skips in suddenly. He wears a Nehru cap and carries a briefcase and a stick. Note that he pronounces “Perera” as “Perara.”)*

CHAU: Cha, cha, cha, cha, cha, damn Chaudaribhoy? Damn nonsense! If you damn Chaudaribhoy, you damn your chances in London and you send 10,000 good Colombo rupees, down the river. (I do not like saying “down the drain”—it is so European and unhygienic.)

HECTOR: I’m sorry, Professor. That was some sort of crude joke Marlene was having with this fellow.

CHAU: Please carry on with some more crude jokes about me, because, as we say in Calcutta, a man must know where he sits. (I hate standing because it is a virtual or vertical admission that a man is not wanted.)

MARLENE: Please sit, Professor.

CHAU: Thank you (*he sits*) and when I’m told “please sleep,” I know I’m completely accepted.

RANJIT: And who is talking about crude jokes!

CHAU: Young man, please do not teach your grandmother to suck apples (I am a vegetarian). When I was referring to sleep, I was not talking of forbidden fruits. I was thinking of the ultimate recumbent posture of man, which is the final fate of all humanity, Asian, African, European, American, and Australian.

HECTOR: Sorry Professor, we will now get the place ready and leave you to your lesson.

CHAU: That will be a mistake, because the background to the lesson has already begun. You see, Mr. Parara, I believe that it is best to enter into the thick of things, and things are very thick, now I can see. We Calcutta educationists have discovered that a guru cannot really educate a pupil until he obtains an insight into the pupil’s motherly, fatherly, and brotherly background, and what better insight than to see father, mother, and brother in turmoil.

MARLENE: He is not my brother, Professor, he is my fiancé.

CHAU: Fiancé! Ah, now I can sympathize with your sensitivity on the subject of sleeping, but I trust the misunderstanding has been understood. What is your name, young man?

RANJIT: Ranjit Fernando.

CHAU: Ah! That will be a popular match, Parara and Fernando! Because I have not failed to observe that like the Smiths and Joneses of England, in Colombo, there are innumerable Pararas and Fernandos. Walking down a lane and looking at the houses, I noted with great glee that the even numbers were Pararas and the odd numbers were Fernandos. It will be a popular match!

HECTOR: There is plenty of time for that.

CHAU: But I have not much time left, so please carry on with the turmoil, so that I can study the family background of my pupil. Hmmm (*looks around*).

(Pause)

HECTOR: We have now lost the mood, Professor, so please you may begin your lesson.

CHAU: Yes, yes, yes. I understand now that psychologically my presence is not conducive to a good fight. Like a mother-in-law keyholing through a keyhole. So, I am willing to forego the knowledge of the family background.

HECTOR: Yes, we'll get the place ready for the lesson.

CHAU: Cha, cha, but the fight must go on in my absence. You must finish the fight. Otherwise it is very bad for the health of the Parara family and its Fernando appendage. Because as Baharata Muni said (long before Aristotle), you must get at the catharsis, you must clean yourself out for the sake of your health. So I will walk down the lane observing the other Pararas and Fernandos, giving you enough time to reach the catharsis.

RANJIT: I'm not interested in reaching anything, and I'm getting out of this mad house.

CHAU: You get out, and I will get out for ever. The lesson has already begun, and at least Marlene must reach her catharsis, in this little drama of the Pararas and the Fernandos.

MARLENE: Ranjit, please wait, for my sake.

(He agrees by gesture.)

CHAU: Thank you. Please carry on the turmoil, while I walk up and down the lane, observing other Pararas and other Fernandos. (*skips out*)

(*There is a silence in which they wonder how they could pick up the threads of their quarrel, or "Little Drama," as the Indian Professor put it.*)

HECTOR: (*beginning quietly*) Look Ranjit, I have no objection at all to your coming and going as you will. It's only that I'm asking you to be considerate about Marlene's future. Sorry. But if I didn't say it, no one would have.

RANJIT: And how am I being inconsiderate to Marlene's future?

HECTOR: By not realizing that we have exactly three months to make it, which is only ninety days. As Marlene’s father, I have a right to say it—within these ninety days nothing must distract her from the main target. She has to keep up with her exercises, pay regular visits to the doctor and the diet people, the poise and carriage people, the speech people, the beauty people, and most important of all, for an hour every morning Professor Chaudaribhoy has to awaken her emotional and intellectual responses to the continent she represents. You can see how badly the first lesson has begun . . . so it’s best you stick to a strict appointment schedule.

MARLENE: Certainly not, daddy. I won’t have Ranjit asking for appointments to visit me.

RANJIT: In that case, I’d rather not visit.

MARLENE: No! Ranjit can come and go as and when he wishes as he has always done. I don’t want to be a nervous wreck at the end of ninety days. I must be healthy and happy, and unless I can have the same freedom I always had with Ranjit, I’ll never be happy.

HECTOR: You won’t be happy if you mess up your chances on Miss World.

MARLENE: Unless I am happy, I will mess up my chances on Miss World. You forget that I won Miss Ceylon and Miss Asia without any restrictions on Ranjit’s freedom.

HECTOR: Miss World is a different matter, and I warn you, don’t risk your future happiness. If you insist, I don’t want to be responsible, let Ranjit take over as your manager.

RANJIT: I don’t want to manage any of this sordid business, and I don’t believe all the reasons you give. Some time ago you told me that Marlene was not at home, when she was in her bedroom. You lied, that’s all.

HECTOR: You cheeky pup!

RANJIT: I’m getting out! (*He moves off*)

MARLENE: (*intervening*) Please, Ranjit, I am asking you to stay. Daddy, don’t forget that all this is my money. If we are to lose

the whole thing, it's my money that's lost. The whole thing was won on my sensitivity and my beauty.

*(Father and mother start moving out. Father stops at door.)*

HECTOR: Never forget, your beauty and your sensitivity were both inherited.

*(They go in.)*

MARLENE: Oh! I didn't mean to hurt him. . . . God, what a mess.

RANJIT: Please let me go in peace and there won't be a mess.

MARLENE: Oh Ranjit, don't mess it still further by being so difficult. Please sit down.

*(She sobs gently and silently. The parents tiptoe in, and, a moment later, Chaudaribhoy. Marlene looks up. She is the first to notice that Chaudaribhoy is in their presence—the others catch on through Marlene's glance.)*

CHAU: Catharsis for you, and I must also confess catharsis for me.

HECTOR: You were walking down the lane, observing the other Pararas and Fernandos?

CHAU: I was keyholing at this keyhole, observing these Pararas and this Fernando. So first I have enriched my tutorial capacity, and second, I have achieved catharsis for Marlene. As we say in the land of Baharatha, I have released two birds by opening one cage (or keyhole . . . as in our case). You Mr. Parara and you Mrs. Parara, will achieve your catharsis, much later in the drama. But now, this very moment, we must achieve the catharsis for Mr. Fernando. So if you all will leave me alone with Fernando for a while, I will summon the Pararas later.

HECTOR: Professor, if I may say so, you are engaged for the benefit of Marlene.

RANJIT: I don't . . .

CHAU: There is no Marlene like that. Marlene is the synthesis of various influences, and Fernando is one. I have undertaken the Education of Miss Asia, and one must not make the elementary mistake of say, mistaking New Delhi, Peking, Rawalpindi, Jubulpoor, Rangoon, etc. for Asia. . . . there is the vast

hinterland in between. Similarly, Fernando is in the hinterland of Miss Asia. Thank you (meaning get out!). (*The others withdraw*)

RANJIT: I have no desire for any contact with you.

CHAU: Contact with me? That is not the point. Have you no desire for contact with Marlene? (*Silence*) Even before I first entered this room I was keyholing out there, and I heard Marlene say that if you insist, she will even give up this whole thing. That is a very unstable situation for the education of Miss Asia.

RANJIT: That was her idea. I never said so.

CHAU: You don't have to say it, Ranjit. All you have to do is transmit that feeling to Marlene. And you are transmitting that feeling to Marlene now.

RANJIT: Definitely not.

CHAU: Positively yes! Ranjit, I was also once a boy, and I was also once a lover boy (in my own vegetarian way—of course). So I know what it feels like . . . to feel that you are just an appendage to a beauty queen. The dependence of the female on the male, especially in Asia, is a prerequisite for harmony. Now the harmony is disturbed . . . and you must get on top again to restore it. Have I hit the middle of the sunflower? (*Silence*) Yet you cannot get on to the top again because Marlene is climbing a kind of ladder, which it is not practical for you to ascend—the ladder of fame through beauty. You can almost see her up there, as Shakespeare wallah said, “scorning the base diplomas from which she did ascend.” I am not wrong? (*Silence*) Now, if you cannot climb up, then you must pull her down, to establish the harmony again, and if it is in the interest of harmony, why not pull her down? Yes, I mean, let's get together and pull her down.

RANJIT: What do you mean?

CHAU: Pull, pull, like this (*he demonstrates*) pull her down. We do it together.

(*The Pereras enter*)

We have achieved a highly successful catharsis between Mr. Fernando and myself and, as I said, the catharsis for Mr. Parara and Mrs. Parara will come much later in the drama. And now for our first lesson, Marlene.

HECTOR: Yes, Professor.

CHAU: Oh, I was not aware of your highly successful commercial background, Mr. Parara. But as we go along we get more into the background. And Mrs. Parara, while Mr. Parara was doing business in London, I suppose you were enjoying the knick-knacks of the Woolworths!

VIOLET: No, I had to stay back in Ceylon to look after little Marlene.

CHAU: That is a great pity, because the ransacking of the Woolworths is a widespread English spiritual experience. But in three months time, you will make the pilgrimage to London . . . if all goes well . . .

HECTOR: What do you mean? We are already in the finals, and at least we will get to London. What-do-you-mean—"If all goes well?"

CHAU: Because (*swiftly taking Marlene by the hand to Centre Stage with a single deft movement, he faces her still holding one hand. His other hand is free to mime the holding up of a delicate instrument*). I am about to begin the delicate operation of scratching this bud of natural ignorance with the sharp instrument of political education. The results are unpredictable. The education of Miss Asia! Shall we begin!

#### RAPID CURTAIN

*[The whole of Act Two consists of "The Lesson" on Asia by Chaudaribhoy. At the end of it, Miss Asia is in a strange state: detachment from beauty contests and a growing attachment to her teacher and his representation of the plight of postcolonial Asia. What follows is a small sample from "The Lesson."]*



CHAU: What do you do? Hinmm, I’ll have to think about that. Of course, I do know what you could have done about a century or two ago . . . but it’s too late now.

MARLENE: Tell me, Professor, what could I have done?

CHAU: Miss Asia, many, many, many, many, years ago you could have thrown around yourself a cordon chastity or cordon virginity, but it’s too late now; they have already deflowered you, long ago.

MARLENE: Deflowered me, Professor?

CHAU: Yes, “deflowered”; that is the sympathetic description from the vegetable world. I am revolted by the more rapacious terminology of the exploiters of the beefeating world.

MARLENE: (*A tremor in her voice*) I am deflowered, Professor?

CHAU: I’m sorry, Miss Asia, yes.

MARLENE: Who are they, Professor?

CHAU: Mainly some English fellows and some French fellows, and some Dutch and some Portuguese. (*Now goose-stepping on the same spot with Hitler salute and mimicking the guttural German.*) You must be thankful you were spared the Germans who reserved their energy to deflower within their own territory some time later.

MARLENE: How long ago, Professor?

CHAU: Long ago, Miss Asia, and the younger fellows are feeling guilty. So the parents were deflowering and now the younger fellows are flower-powering.

*[In Act Three, the plot complications compound. Marlene denounces beauty contests and the personal material gain they bring, culminating with a passionate recital from Tagore.]*

MARLENE: The child who is decked with princes’ robes, and who has jewelled chains round his neck loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step.

It is no gain, thy bondage of finery,  
 if it keep one shut off from the healthful dust  
 of the earth, if it robs one of the right of entrance  
 to the great fair of common human life.

*[However, she is persuaded to go to London for the finals of "Miss World" if only to bring back the prize money to provide her mite to alleviate conditions in Asia. In the meantime, Marlene's family become suspicious about this "Professor Raasagoola Chaudaribhoy's" real identity and character. While they make inquiries, Chaudaribhoy and Marlene declare their love for each other.]*

CHAU: And when did it happen to you, Marlene?

MARLENE: From the very first moment you stirred my soul for Asia, all the babies who were dying . . . and when did it happen to you, Chaudari?

CHAU: From the very first moment that you stirred my soul for Miss Asia! All the beautiful babies that are living!

*(They walk towards each other.)*

MARLENE: Take a bite from my Raasagoola.

CHAU: Take a bite from my Raasagoola.

*(They bite each other's Raasagoola, then swallow each other's Raasagoola.)*

MARLENE: The lump in my throat is gone.

CHAU: The lump in my throat is gone, already it seems like ages.

*(Involuntarily, they are about to embrace and kiss in the European manner, Chaudaribhoy's hands being on her upper arms near the shoulders. But suddenly he checks himself and begins moving his hands down the length of her arms—which automatically forces his body backwards—till his fingertips are touching her fingertips.)*

CHAU: *(Timing his words with the motions described above and speaking sternly)* It becomes necessary to remind ourselves that we must avoid any imitation of the European manner, of the sweaty pasting of the bodies, and the uncouth sucking of the

lips (at least not in public). In Asia, the transmission of the magnetism between the opposite sexes can be done most artistically and hygienically through the *fingertips*.

MARLENE: Chaudari!

*[As the action moves on, Marlene's parents as well as her now rejected previous boyfriend's suspicions are proved correct. Chaudaribhoy is no professor of Calcutta University but a retrenched comic actor of the Bengali theatre. Two mute Colombo thugs are employed to have him removed from the scene. But in a "dramatic coup" Chaudaribhoy declares a voluntary exit, on purely theatrical grounds.]*

*(Turning around with his umbrella, to face her)*

CHAU: Marlene, I wish that were possible, but I will nevertheless have to defend myself in the Lower Courts.

MARLENE: For what?

CHAU: The charge of impersonation. A minor one, but for a comic actor, a major irony.

MARLENE: But I will wait for you, Chaudari.

CHAU: If I could, I would wait for you forever, Marlene, but I cannot!

MARLENE: Why Chaudari?

CHAU: *(Closing the umbrella and disposing of it in one swift movement)* Because I am a comic actor and no actor, comic or tragic, can wait on the stage till all the possibilities are completely exhausted. Then the audience hangs on by habit, for the final curtain. I must be gone.

MARLENE: Don't play the fool, Chaudari. I'm not talking about the theatre. I'm talking about love.

CHAU: But love is like the theatre, Marlene. For it to be a sweet memory, the curtain must fall while it is still surging. Otherwise it will degenerate into deadly habit.

MARLENE: *(The quality of crying in her voice, breaking away and holding on to her mother)* That is not true, Chaudari!

CHAU: It will be true, Marlene, but the wisdom must come before the curtain falls. I must be gone.

MARLENE: It is not true!

CHAU: It is true, Marlene. It is the last fact in the education of Miss Asia.

MARLENE: (*In anguish, and still close to her mother*) Then what about all the other facts in the education of Miss Asia! All those Funds don't exist! Then all you have told me is not true. Has there been no earthquake in Istanbul? And what about the great tidal waves in East Pakistan? The ashes of Hiroshima, the bloody red rivers of Indonesia, the great famine of Bihar? . . . (*mellowing a little*) and most of all the babies, Chaudari, the little babies who have died without milk and the little children who have lived without reading and writing. . . . I know that all these things are true, but just now, they don't *feel* true.

CHAU: Because, Marlene, you are again confusing the subjective with the objective (*moving close to her*). The teacher with the teaching (*now taking her gently across to a humpty on the side of the apron*); the teacher appears untrue, so you cannot believe the teachings with your soul. (*Gradually sitting her on the humpty, he sits beside her.*) The teacher may be untrue, Marlene, but the teachings are true. They are true, Marlene. Say it to me the way I taught you. (*no response*) Just once more (*still no response*) . . . once more (*still no response*) . . . please, Marlene, (*she looks at him*) . . . for the last time . . . (*she gives in*).

MARLENE: (*Begins hesitantly and falteringly*) It is true . . .

CHAU: (*Speaking simultaneously to give her the encouragement*) It is true . . .

(*He continues to speak for another sentence or so, and then fades off when he realizes that she has gathered momentum.*)

MARLENE: . . . that hundreds of thousands of black-eyed babies make their first and last little cries even before they slither out into the sunlight. Those who reach the sunlight linger awhile, but only for a while. And those who linger longer, maybe even very much longer, can only write their own footprints on the burning sands; and will only read the colours of the rainbow, and the strange shapes of great dark clouds.

CHAU: All these things are true, Marlene. You must believe me.

MARLENE: Otherwise, there will be nothing to believe. . . . They must be true . . .

CHAU: What is not true is Professor Raasagoola Chaudaribhoy of the University of Calcutta. As it is said in the *Natyashastra*, Professor Chaudaribhoy may be only a dramatic device, but the hundreds of thousands of babies is a dramatic truth. So you may forget Chaudaribhoy, but keep the babies, Marlene.

MARLENE: I will always remember both, Chaudari (*after saying this, she continues to sit, her thoughts far away, but Chaudaribhoy moves briskly back to centre stage and animatedly says his farewells to the others.*)

CHAU: Goodbye, Mr. Parara. For you the survival of Mr. Parara is a dramatic truth, and all your cheques are a dramatic device. But in your case, keep the cheques and forget the truth. (*He showers Perera with the cheques.*) Goodbye, Mrs. Parara. In your case there is no divergence between the truth and the dramatic device. You have been simply realistic. Mr. Fernando, I will not say goodbye to you because for so long I seem to be offending you, so now I will be suggesting you be defending me. As a dramatic consolation, I am offering you your first case in the Lower Courts. (*To Alfred and George*) And you two gods that come down into the theatre, to lift things up (*using his hands to show how he was lifted*) as a dramatic precaution, your silence has been golden. (*The knocking, strongly again.*) Marlene, please open the door.

(*Marlene stands up, but does not move. Chaudaribhoy moves forward and opens the door himself, then mimes as if he is being dragged away just outside the door, by a policeman whom the audience cannot see. He stumbles backwards into sight again, and starts shouting at the unseen policeman.*)

Gently! Gently! You, Mr. Policeman, are from Colombo; I am from Calcutta, but we are all Asians. . . . so gently, let me say goodbye to Marlene with that walk on the Galle Face Gardens that I never had.

*(They meet centre stage, just inside the curtain line, and begin their single spot mimed walk. The music of the sitar comes up softly.)*

**RANJIT:** I'd better walk behind them.

*(Somewhat behind them, but to the left of Marlene, he too begins a mimed single spot walk. All the others are blacked out by the lighting.)*

**CHAU:** *(To Marlene, while walking)* A line from *Githanjali*, before I  
go.

**MARLENE:** "Clouds heap upon clouds as it darkens. Ah love, why dost thou let me wait, inside, at the door, all alone?"

*(He stops "walking," and Marlene on his left and Ranjit, still behind and to her left, also stop.)*

**CHAU:** "The baby cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away. In the very next moment *(slyly indicating Ranjit)* to find in the left one its consolation"—also from *Githanjali!*

*(All three resume mime walking again, as the sitar music rises, but this time it is clear that the two bodies in front, though still side by side, have tilted in divergent directions.)*

LIGHTS FADE, CURTAIN