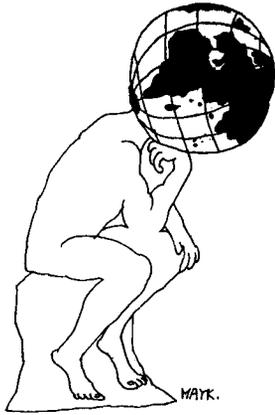


Fictions of Freedom

Recent Commonwealth Writing—By MICHAEL THORPE



“WHAT HAS MADE IT impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire!” So the magistrate comes to recognise in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a recognition which in Coetzee’s allegory remains relevant to South Africa, whose subject blacks still thirst for “liberation” as the talismanic key to a better future. Elsewhere, most of the colonised peoples in the British

Empire attained “freedom” almost a generation ago. Not for these new peoples, Chinua Achebe affirmed, the literature of the alienated individual, but a truly African literature binding in one community the individual, the writer, and society. This was what freedom was for, not the existentialist balancing act over the void. There was, however, much repair work to be done. Literature would help restore pride in their being to a subject people whose history and culture had been denigrated, repairing the broken links with pre-colonial history and the world of the ancestors.

Thus one saw, at the French African extreme, a *négritude* movement tending towards inverse racism, while the more moderate “English” reaction may be well represented by Achebe’s ambition:

“I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”¹

Within six years of Nigeria’s Independence, Achebe’s *A Man of the People* bitterly satirised wholesale political corruption; soon afterwards he took the losing side in the Nigerian Civil War. Since then he has published no new novel. His compatriot, Wole Soyinka, imprisoned during that war by the Federal side, had exposed as early as his play *Dance of the Forests* (staged, ironically, for the Independence celebrations in Lagos) the contradictions inherent in the desire to extol Africa’s ancient “glories”—of Empire. African Empire has only revived once in name (Bokassa’s), but everywhere one-party states, leadership cults, and at the worst gross barbarity such as Idi Amin’s, have instead revived spectres of Darkest Africa.

The scribes of Africa Revived are on the retreat. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, after a year’s imprisonment in Kenya—essentially for breaking away from the colonial language and subversively addressing his audience in their own—is now in English exile. Exile, self-chosen or compelled, is the common lot, sometimes dubiously sweetened by a sinecure in a Black Studies programme in an American university. Nor is it only Africa who alienates her questioning sons: if more by choice than compulsion, and as much for reasons of publishing economics as political ones, many Indian, Pakistani and West Indian writers live and work in the vilified West, free only there to write what they will. Of the ten whose latest books I discuss here, six have spent their writing lives in England or Canada; two, of Maori descent, write as, in effect, colonised citizens of New Zealand. All, except R. K. Narayan, contribute to expressing a crisis of the values of community. While this can give a depressing unity of theme to the new English literatures, there is a healthy strain of truth-telling and a persistent desire for regeneration.

OUT OF THE TURMOIL and near fragmentation of independent India, R. K. Narayan’s fiction has abstracted an impression of changeless stability. His aims are modest: to convey “unambiguously the thoughts and actions of a set of personalities, who flourish in a small town located in a corner of South India” (interview in *The Independent*, 24 October 1986). In such works alien, “Western” influences may intrude, but comedy and continuity (or inertia) repel them. His latest novel, *Talkative Man*,² smacks of exhaustion, is virtual self-parody.

T. M., an obscure journalist in Narayan’s Malgudi, tells of his great scoop, an encounter with Dr Rann or “Timbuctoo Man”, a self-made exotic who is actually “a pure Indian from a southernmost village”. Rann masquerades in three-piece suits, speaks of a mysterious “mission” for the United Nations, and intimidates the credulous provincials as initially knowing outsiders often do in Narayan’s novels. T. M. becomes Rann’s uneasy host and shield against a formidable, pursuing wife, setting Rann free to pursue, not his research, but a girl student with whom he plans to elope. This, apparently, has been his true mission in life, though the locals are so impressed by his academic pretensions as to invite him to address the Lotus Club “on a brand new subject, ‘Futurology’”. He lectures on the inevitable overwhelming of the planet about 3000 AD by a monstrous weed, which appalling prophecy so agitates anxious mothers as to cause a riot. T. M. has meanwhile foiled Dr Rann’s abduction plot and delivers him instead into his wife’s massive conjugal embrace. However, the novel’s dying fall records his escape to continue his con man’s career, Narayan taking the strange step of explaining away the story’s truncation: apparently the anti-

¹ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), p. 45.

² *Talkative Man*. By R. K. NARAYAN. Heinemann, £7.95.

hero was as mysterious to Narayan as to T. M.—the philanthropist and the obsessed “futurologist” (a tentative satire on expert modern purveyors of doom) hardly cohering in one. The art has grown complacent in its comic and engaging portrayal of a naive provincialism which may be fluttered, but remains essentially immune to outside influences; where the modern world impinges, it is repelled as absurd.

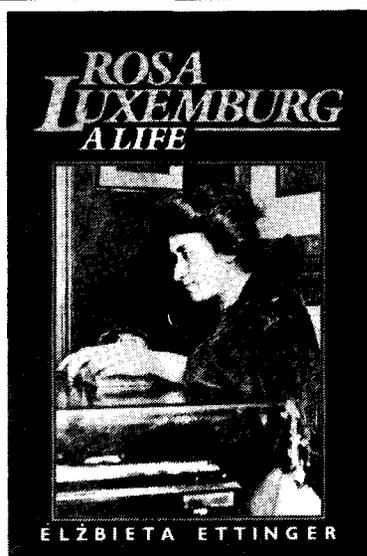
NARAYAN'S CONSERVATISM is not, in the Indian context, unusual. Indian writers have not felt compelled, like Achebe, to vindicate a history and civilisation which long pre-date the episode of the Raj. A conviction of continuity, an essential unchangingness, remains accessible to Indians, though critical voices increase—and, indeed, it is hard to think of an Indian novel that so bleakly exposes the wife's misery in a traditional Hindu marriage as Narayan's little known early work, *The Dark Room* (1938). By contrast his comedy touching on the contraception campaign, *A Painter of Signs* (1976), shuns the harsher aspects central to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, an unsparing satire on the Nehru dynasty. “India and the Nehrus”, in the late Shiva Naipaul's sadly slim posthumous essays,³ trenchantly analyses how that notorious Indian spirituality which is held to

³ *An Unfinished Journey*. By SHIVA NAIPAUL. Hamish Hamilton, £9.95.

⁴ *Incidents at the Shrine*. By BEN OKRI. Heinemann, £9.95.

sustain continuity has become translated, in political terms, into “the shabbiest idolatry of family”.

AFRICA, CONVULSED SINCE the heady, post-Freedom years by revolutions and coups, keeps throwing up troubled writers who must confront, encompass, or obliquely reflect chaos. Already in youth they may, like the Nigerian Ben Okri, have chosen exile. Unlike Achebe, who sought—and still seeks—through “beneficent fictions” to heal his people's wounded psyche, Okri's fiction painfully probes their self-inflicted wounds.⁴ In a bleak Civil War story, “Laughter Beneath the Bridge”, a girl of the wrong tribe dances her defiance of the trigger-nervous soldiers in an Egungun mask which traditionally (as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) it is sacrilege to violate: “You'll die if you do.” The soldiers unmask her, but it is she who is driven off to an anonymous death. The title story, “Incidents at the Shrine”, allegorises the limits of ancestral wisdom: if home is, traditionally, “where you receive power”, it lies in a recognition of inevitable suffering. When the scene shifts to London, Okri's other, less concretely evoked locale, there is a complementary desolation: a feverish dream of wandering and homelessness, cancelling the narrator's desired “reverie about some sort of room in the sky where lies and illusions and self-deceptions are made naked; and where humanity can recover its very basic sense of terror and compassion”.



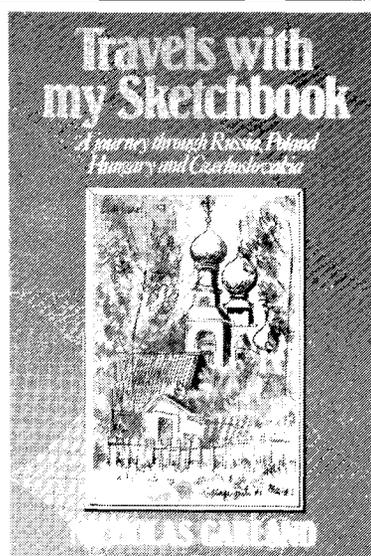
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By contrast—a singular contrast in today's African writing—B. Kojo Laing's *Ghana*, in the mid-1970s, is an "expectant space", thronged even after the death of Nkrumah's African Socialism, spilling from beneath the "soldier's cap" of military rule. *Search, Sweet Country*⁵ is alive with visionaries and searchers—for the ideal state, the utopian village—and with redemptive unions: "Add Adwoa to Loww! and the rain will fall." The good witch Adwoa herself, in a way some Africans still believe in, can make soul-flights by night and comfort the unhappy in their dreams. Such flights smother the horrors with ebullient fancy: the secret service, the military, are carnival figures, not Okri's prosaic destroyers:

"All the ordinary people were the real people: they lived beyond the slogans, they outlasted the politicians, even those that wanted to label and measure their very blood . . . there was the ruled blood, and there was the unruled blood that did the ruling. By the Chorkor beach Acheampong's Revolution lay exhausted in the sands, being pushed up and down by the damnation of the tides."

Acheampong was overthrown in 1979; Ghana's new saviour is Jerry Rawlings: is Laing's faith in the "real people" hope or fatalism? Though supernatural ascension, farcical comedy, and masterful language may be the author's means of clinging to sanity through the dark years, they also voice literature's life-affirming force with an imaginative freedom seen rarely in African writing since the early Soyinka and Tutuola.

V. S. NAIPAUL WROTE in his controversial *The Middle Passage* (1962) of "the squalor of the politics that came to Trinidad in 1946", and his early novels satirised political corruption with a comic verve that would soon evaporate, darkening into the grotesque mayhem of *Guerillas*. Austin Clarke left his native Barbados in 1955 and has since lived mostly in Canada, apart from an abortive year in 1975-76 as General Manager of the Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation, since when he has vowed never to return without some radical change of government.

In a recent novel, *Proud Empires*,⁶ he does return, in a manner akin to the early Naipaul's, to the Barbados of the 1950s. The novel's pattern and small-island setting also recall George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, though with a cooler hindsight. The humour, like Naipaul's, turns often upon colonial confusions of values and ideas: "responsible guvnamment" translates as "self-betterment first", politicians exploit the catch-cry of the "small man" but are admired for living big. The subtle articulations of colour—Boy, the hero, is distinguished by belonging to "a family of complexion and

colour", the Prime Minister is, inevitably, "high-brown"—undermine the sloganeering for blackness. John Moore-Adams, who dresses like a "black American tourist" and is a wealthy landowner returned from "Amurca", like George Lamming's Trumper berates these contemptible "niggers" for looking still toward England: "Oxford and Cambridge have train the goddamn niggers who're running 'bout here, keeping us in a new kind o' slavery." Finally Boy, after coming top in the Island examinations, breaks the cycle by going to Toronto's "jungle" of "the snow and the cold and the night". His displacement and alienation there are cursorily sketched; when he returns and quickly forsakes his ambitions as a lawyer, yielding to pressure to take up a political career, Clarke withholds authorial irony, but there is a suggestion of cynical, resigned acquiescence. Perhaps a bitter sequel is being written.

IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S typically low-key second novel, *A State of Independence*,⁷ the narrative opens with his hero Bertram's return to his small-island home, twenty years after he had left to take up his Island's scholarship to study law in England. Independence is imminent, a new life for the individual seems possible, but Bertram sees with what are now "English" eyes "overwhelming" degradation and quickly, his vague expectations crumbling, falls into introspection and—goaded by whispered "dust-encrusted words" muttering of his failure overseas—into bitter alienation. Rejected by a mother he has neglected, despised by Jackson Clayton, a schoolfriend he had beaten for the scholarship turned "big man", he finds brief oblivion only in the ageing body of Patsy, the sweetheart of his youth.

Bertram's English years are barely sketched, but as in Austin Clarke's book that background is irrelevant to the new realities of independence for the "dwarfish countries" of the Caribbean: "we living Stateside now", Jackson enlightens him. And Patsy sees the deeper implications of this: "It's all here in the present, for we too small a country to have a past." No wishful African roots redeem the present here (in *Proud Empires*, Boy shrinks from "this uncomfortable association" with a savage past); there is only Bertram's disturbing recollection of "the games they used to play as children. Their favourite was African Crocodiles, which involved stripping some fool naked, usually him, and then dangling them over the end of the pier." Stripped again, of all larger pretensions, Bertram accepts his return to mediocrity and resolves to devote himself to his mother's welfare.

Both Clarke's and Phillips's novels settle for unheroic realities: their heroes are virtually ciphers to whom things happen; little, good or ill, is self-determined. In a colonial or post-colonial state the "people" remain colonised; there is no brave new nation. Austin Clarke's Boysie, in his earlier *Storm of Fortune*, had seen that "All white people is bitches, if you ask me. And we, as black people, ain't much different, neither" (a truth, alas, beyond the grasp of romantic white liberals). The new Boysies, seizing their chance, are the black heirs of the old white plantation-owners. The fiction confronts one with a diminished image of man.

⁵ *Search, Sweet Country*. By B. KOJO LAING. Heinemann, £10.95.

⁶ *Proud Empires*. By AUSTIN CLARKE. Gollancz, £9.95.

⁷ *A State of Independence*. By CARYL PHILLIPS. Faber & Faber, £8.95. The close model for Phillips's fictional island is St Kitts, though he grew up in England where his parents brought him in the year of his birth.

THIS MAY BE FELT as tragic or, oppressed by diminution, as pathetic. Pathos, stemming from a traumatised helplessness, runs through the first collection of stories, *Digging Up the Mountains*,⁸ of Neil Bissoondath, a young nephew (and fictional heir) of V. S. Naipaul, who emigrated from Trinidad to Canada in 1973. As with Naipaul, his vision ranges beyond Trinidad: it focuses upon convulsed “half-formed societies” and includes, in the stories set in Canada, emigrant figures practising inverse racism. A Naipaulesque diagnostic note is strong: the hurt of history underlies the suffering and self-contempt of those who remain in the small island—“our history doesn’t lead anywhere. It’s just a big black hole”—and continues to poison the minds and actions of those who leave. A darkly humorous Naipaulesque encounter with a “revolutionary” black student at a Canadian university, like the student’s wife’s photograph, “seemed to capture nothing but distress”.

The insecurity of the Indian businessman in the title story and of another such figure in a story entitled “Insecurity” is the keynote of consciousness. The old colonial hegemony has been supplanted by régimes which utter the new cant of “the people” and, sustained by masked and intoxicated killers, run their brutal course, breaking brittle lives, abusing vulnerable flesh—“a carnival of radicals and madmen”.

In a compressed, even constricted, narrative of multiple correspondences and parallels, Wilson Harris’s *Carnival*⁹ seeks yet again to articulate through an infernal and purgatorial “biography of the spirit” the way to redeem the “savage heart” of a “tormented colonial age”. Carnival time is all times, not the linear time in which Clarke’s, Phillips’s and Bissoondath’s characters agitate. Carnival spatial action is a masked mode whose figures compose a mysterious unity, if we will seek it, as the narrator does in piecing together the significance of the life of his subject, Everyman Masters (one of those “master spirits who descend”), who is in turn Virgilian guide “backward in time”.

Set in New Forest, Harris’s name for his native country of Guyana, and in the Holland Park area of London where he has lived for over twenty years, the narrative of *Carnival* follows a characteristic quest movement, through a phantasmagoria of correspondences, shifting, overlapping, dissolving the conventional planes of being, time, place and perception, “a modern allegory” which will seem to uninitiated readers to demand a preparatory course in hermeneutics. Recently, the meaning of Harris’s fiction has become self-consciously pointed, a metaphysical shorthand on the surface of a narrative whose point cannot readily be grasped by any but those thoroughly versed in his previous work and able at once to recognise the recurrent complex metaphors: El Dorado, river, sun, boulders, waterfalls, exploratory boat and crew. . . . Such readers may in glimpses, reading and

rereading as one does a sacred book, be occasionally moved to see what Harris expressed more compellingly in his inspired Guyana Quartet of the 1960s (happily reprinted in one volume in 1985) and since in his critical prose:

“In the context of carnival or masked comedy and upheaval which disperses reflections of form . . . we may perceive . . . the fascinations of *shared ego or desire and conquest* entrenched within cultures. This brings home the reality of evil, in which cultures are immersed in codes to invert or overturn each other rather than become involved in complex mutuality and the difficult creation of community.”¹⁰

IF FICTION is to contribute to this “difficult creation”, how much difficulty of form can it venture without obscuring its relevatory purpose or, at best, risking limitation to a cultic readership of initiates? In the more realistic fictions of two New Zealand novelists who are also (like Harris) of mixed blood, the writers’ self-division and their society’s are passionately and violently staged—which seems the apt word, for mythical inflation and a straining after epic dimensions are rife in Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*¹¹ and Witi Ihimaera’s *The Matriarch*.¹² Both are, more plainly than Harris’s novel, journeys of discovery by writers intent on giving primacy, not to their *Pakeha* (white) blood, but to the ancestral integrity of their Maori (“people of the land”) descent.

When it was reviewed in its Booker Prize year, *The Bone People* impressed because of the passionate intensity of its unflinching portrayal of the painfully evolving love and self-torment of three people: an autistic child, sensitive and compassionate by nature but traumatised by the mysterious shipwreck from which he was saved, an orphan; Joe Gillayley, his loving yet violent, punishing foster-father; and Kerewin Holmes, a wealthy painter who, believing her skill is burnt out, has withdrawn into a solitary life of exquisite sensation in her romantic tower.

The child, Simon, is apparently Irish, and white; Joe and Kerewin are part *Pakeha*, part Maori, but both, living outside *Maorianga* (Maoriness), lament its loss “in the way [they] live”. Simon, the difficult, anguished boy, draws them into a tense trinity, but when Joe beats him almost to death and is jailed, it seems nothing can reunite them. It is then that the *deus ex machina* of Maori spirituality, which their lives had lacked, claims the adults’ lost souls. Kerewin, with a tumour that is also a symbolic affliction, having almost demolished her tower of illusions, goes into the wilderness to die alone, but is granted a dream vision of “strangely clad people, with golden eyes, brown skin” who welcome her to the *marae* (the assembly-place in front of a Maori meeting-house). Joe, released from prison, is led by telepathic force to encounter an old Maori who, near to death, wishes to pass on to “a broken man”, as was ordained, the custodianship of the *mauri*—the vital principle of the people, “the heart of this land”.

Though an earthquake buries the sacred place, Joe salvages and carries off a potent stone and this, when he is reunited

⁸ *Digging Up the Mountains*. By NEIL BISSOONDATH. André Deutsch, £8.95.

⁹ *Carnival*. By WILSON HARRIS. Faber & Faber, £10.95.

¹⁰ Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space* (Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 13.

¹¹ *The Bone People*. By KERI HULME. Hodder & Stoughton, £8.95; Picador, £3.95.

¹² *The Matriarch*. By WITI IHIMAERA. Heinemann, £10.95.

with Kerewin and Simon to form a new loving trinity, sinks into the earth where she, meanwhile, has rebuilt a ruined Maori hall. We leave them at the heart of a reconstituted community—a wish-fulfilment or fairytale ending in renewal that floats free of the harsh realities both inside and outside the novel.

Essence, though, precedes existence. *The Bone People* ends in regenerative vision; Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* is an encyclopaedic, often pedestrian novel through which the reader, with its narrator and initiate, is inducted into the myths, mysteries and history of the Maoris. The narrator, Tama Mahana, has evidently succeeded in the Pakeha world, earning fame as scholar and lawyer, but this is peripheral; his preoccupation is with the spiritual tutelage imposed upon him since childhood, even beyond her death, by his grandmother Artemis, the matriarch who had "made him as a likeness unto me". Conscious that his Maoriness is losing its force "in a European world", Tama embarks on a quest for his "Maori ancestry", remembering the matriarch's efforts to shape and instruct him, reconstructing in the process Maori myth—the history of the Pakeha-Maori relationship—in a compendious narrative which virtually creates Maoriness, interspersed with Tama's individual struggle to claim and accept his inheritance as the matriarch's heir, chief of the Mahana clan.

It is a complex inheritance, traced from the rebel Te Kooti—resistance leader or "savage"?—and the eloquent Maori parliamentarian, Wi Pere Halbert, both major 19th-century figures whose doings Ihimaera records in lengthy passages drawn from acknowledged historical sources. The deeper inheritance, implanted by frequent retellings of Maori myth, takes one "backward in time to the first dancing when the gods communed with man". Frequently, as in the telling of the story of Takitimu, the holy ark which, in the beginning brought the "cargo of gods" to New Zealand (Aotearoa: shining bright land), the narrative becomes a holy book (clearly the audience is primarily Maori, needing instruction: in contrast to *The Bone People*, much Maori speech is given without translation, thus adding a further mysterious dimension). The Matriarch herself had asked, "How can we prepare you when our houses of learning have long ago been destroyed by the Pakeha, and our religious precepts made mockery of by the crooked cross?" She herself will show him:

"A world where gods and men commune. Where timelessness begins and there is no separation of past and present. A world energised with glowing forces and creatures of light fading in and out of the landscape."

The supernatural is immanent throughout the novel, in both dream and miraculous intervention in the temporal world: this can be menacing, and the narrator is pulled between the matriarch's uncompromising claims—that he guard his *mana*, ruthlessly grasp his inheritance—and the more compassionate humanity his mother urges upon him.

"MODERN WESTERN MAN feels ill at ease before many forms of manifestation of the sacred", wrote Mircea Eliade in his *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*; in the belatedly guilt-ridden efforts by Australian whites to foster the revival of aboriginal cultures Shiva Naipaul found cant and self-deception ("Flight into Blackness", in *An Unfinished Journey*):

"... the escape into an adventure playground of timelessness . . . is a condescending and profoundly flawed prescription for regeneration. Either the Aboriginal is or is not a citizen of Australia. And if he is (which is the case) he must face the consequences. It is not a 'race' that cries out for rescue, but the victims of a historical process, thousands of men, women and children."

The situation in New Zealand is comparable, despite the Kiri te Kanawas and the Witi Ihimaeras.

Ihimaera is himself New Zealand Consul in New York, representing one country, but his writing has reflected a desire to slough off the equivocal identity of the "brown Pakeha" and to recapture the spirit of Maoriness. Such acts of reclamation, as also in Keri Hulme, are symptomatic of a need to struggle free of the stifling blanket of assimilation, not felt as equal citizenship, that threatens a colonised people with the loss of its past, its ancestors (even a licensed multi-culturalism does not relieve these fears). So doing, such writers repossess a world-view that is indisputably theirs, but one may wonder whether its reclamation will lead to a new freedom or an old, regressive bondage. Again, Shiva Naipaul puts the awkward question:

"At best, atavism is a harmless fantasy, not sustainable with any degree of persistent realism under skies criss-crossed by satellites and jet aircraft: at its worst, it must be considered a tragedy—a failure of nerve."

He recognised, too, from bitter experience, that for "those who have been colonised" the existential problem presents itself in its acutest form. "How to exist, how to become properly real—that is the question."

Yü Chia Ao

Sky, milky way and morning mist blend
In the River of Stars, a thousand sails dance
As in a dream, my soul returns to heavenly palaces—
I hear the gods
Ask eagerly where I go?

The way is long. I sigh, the day late
What good to study poetry, write striking lines?
In ninety thousand li of wind, the roc just flies
Wind, do not stop
Blow the grass boat to the three mountains

Li Ch'ing-chao
Translated by Julie Landau