In 2008, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which won the Booker Prize in 1980, was given an additional honor by the prize committee when it was selected for the Best of the Booker award. When asked about the qualities of a Booker-Prize-winning novel, one of the prize organizers candidly replied that “the key is literary tourism—taking the reader somewhere they are not familiar with” and “giv[ing] people information and feeling about something they knew very little about indeed” through “a description of something that most of us don’t know anything about” (Dowd para. 2–4). That Rushdie’s sprawling, dense, and highly stylized prose should be considered an almost transparent account offering readers in the West a touristic glimpse of India, giving them information and feeling about a faraway place that was once the jewel in Britain’s imperial crown, suggests that even an author and a novel often considered formative of anglophone postcolonial literature and criticism may run afoul of what one critic calls the “anthropological exotic” that turns even an ironic and self-reflexive text such as *Midnight’s Children* into “a surrogate guidebook” that “has been exploited, directly or indirectly, for the Raj nostalgia it despises” (Huggan 37, 115). While Graham Huggan argues that a “strategic exoticism” on the part of postcolonial writers both resists and is symptomatic of the anthropological exotic (32), in this chapter I revise this characterization of the postcolonial literary marketplace as a site in which the
veil of exoticism is overlaid by Euro-American readers and publishers onto writers from postcolonial societies. I depart from the notion that the anthropological exotic functions as an inevitable interpellation by the West of the Rest, in which writers and texts from the latter are seen as either symptoms of or struggling against the hegemony of the exoticizing literary marketplace. Instead, I conceptualize the anthropological exotic of the postcolonial literary marketplace according to what the Frankfurt School critics call the culture industry and argue that in the twenty-first century, writers who depict their cultures and societies with a high degree of literary verisimilitude are working through a cosmopolitical (as opposed to a geopolitical) aesthetic that revises realist historical fiction through the use of ethnographic tactics and techniques. These ethnographic tactics both evoke and interrogate the exoticism existing in Western perceptions of postcolonial societies as well as the ideologies of homogenous collective identity in their own national cultures often promulgated in official accounts of national history. Perceiving the anthropological exotic as a culture industry sheds light on the fetishization of postcolonial writers and their texts for mass consumption and conceptualizes it as a field of productive forces that may be traversed and articulated rather than as a determinate interpellation of Third World otherness by First World selves.

If one important aspect of postcolonial literature is (to paraphrase Salman Rushdie’s famous phrase) the empire writing back to the metropole, then what we are seeing in the novels of Twan Eng Tan and Preeta Samarasan is the postcolonial diaspora writing back-to-back, responding to both the metropole and their nation-state, transforming the oppositional countermovement in the dialectic between the (former) colony and metropole into a negative dialectic that triangulates the metropole, the postcolonial nation-state, and diasporic cultural space. This triangulation is cosmopolitical because diasporic Malaysian writers such as Samarasan and Tan draw on literary resources and predecessors in Anglo-American writing and their own national milieu in order to interrogate the discourses of cultural absolutism and exoticism both in the global literary marketplace and in their own society. Samarasan and Tan engage in a literary cosmopolitics as they position themselves as diasporic subjects who nonetheless maintain abiding attachments to Malaysia precisely by critiquing the nation through their literary representations. Their self-positioning as diasporic writers is a literary tactic advancing a critical national consciousness in contrast to Malaysia’s dominant cultural discourse that relegates them to a secondary or marginalized position. I examine Samarasan’s *Evening Is the Whole Day* and Tan’s *The Gift of Rain* in the context of Malaysia’s cultural politics and official nationalism,
which define Malaysian national culture in terms of an indigenous Malay ethnic identity in spite of the historical and contemporary presence of sizable ethnic Chinese and Indian communities in the country. Furthermore, Malaysian national literature is also defined as a body of works written in the Malay language, excluding literature written in Chinese, Tamil, or English. I argue that, in their novels, Samarasan and Tan (who are of South Asian and Chinese descent respectively) combine an ethnographic approach to Malaysian culture and society together with literary tactics used by writers elsewhere in the South Asian and Chinese diaspora in order to accomplish two objectives. First, they interrogate metropolitan or First World conventions of consuming postcolonial or Third World literatures as exoticized representations of distant and different cultures; second, they critique the “ethnic absolutism” (Gilroy 2) of a Malay-centered national culture established by their home country.

Graham Huggan’s conceptualization of strategic exoticism provides the point of departure for my formulation of a cosmopolitical aesthetic in Samarasan’s and Tan’s novels. Both writers draw on the dramatic realism of historical fiction to depict important moments in Malaysia’s colonial and postcolonial past, but this historical veracity is revised through their use of ethnographic tactics, an interrogation of the anthropological exotic from within the dominant field of the global literary marketplace. Avrom Fleishman explains that the historical novel fleshes out the “domestic detail” of “a specific past situation in all its concreteness,” and that as a “genre [it] is unashamedly hybrid: it contemplates the universal but does not depart from the rich factuality of history in order to reach that elevation” (8). While Samarasan and Tan certainly fill their narratives with rich and vivid details of colonial Malayan and postcolonial Malaysian society, they depart from Fleishman’s conclusion that “a historical story must become a heroic (or anti-heroic) plot” and finally culminate in “the ultimate subject of the historical novel” that is “the human life conceived as historical life” (10, 11). Furthermore, Fleishman’s contention about historical fiction closely resembles the kind of literary tourism touted by the organizer of the Booker Prize, because “the form of historical fiction” is “to interpret the experience of individual men [. . .] in such a way as to make their lives not only felt by the reader as he would feel his own existence were he to have lived in the past, but understood as only someone who had seen that life as a completed whole could understand it” (12–13). More recent studies of history in contemporary fiction have moved away from such an experiential and holistic purchase on the past; Eric Berlatsky suggests that postmodern historical fiction “critiques narrative’s tendency to obscure our access to the past” but, despite the appar-
ent rejection of epistemological certainty in more extreme glosses of post-modernism and poststructuralism, also “suggests alternative forms as more effective means of accessing the real” (15). These forms “cannot be found in narrative ordering but only in the contingent and the fragmentary,” in the moments where circumstances and events become “that which rises up to take us by surprise and which therefore has the capacity to change” existing relations of knowledge and power (18, 19). Berlatsky’s discussion of post-modern historical novels’ ability to “complicate and problematize notions of reference precisely in order to suggest a subtler, and therefore more compelling, model of mimesis” (8) accords with the ethnographic tactics at work in Samarasan’s and Tan’s novels, a mode of mimesis that rehearses the veracity of historical reality through the inflections of contingent and fragmentary events and forces that rise up with surprising momentum. These novels do not dismiss historical reference but rather use such references tactically to trace a cosmopolitical aesthetic; put differently, they employ figurative language toward an “ethnography of global connection,” performing “an exploration of ethnographic methods for studying the work of the universal” through the twists and turns of historical fiction (Tsing 1). Universals, for Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, are general concepts such as capitalism, social justice, and modernity, and nationalism can certainly be regarded as a similar universal aspiration, “a chance to participate in the global stream of humanity” (1). Tsing’s particular approach to the ethnography of the global, which departs from metaphors of fluidity and freedom, emphasizes what she calls “friction” to describe the “heterogeneous and unequal encounters [that] can lead to new arrangements of culture and power,” highlighting how even as universal patterns of “domination and discipline come into their own” they may not necessarily do so “in the forms laid out by their proponents” (5). Samarasan and Tan engage with the domination and discipline of the anthropological exotic intrinsic in both the global literary marketplace and post-colonial nation-state, and their ethnographic tactics represent the friction between diasporic perspectives on national culture and strategies of cultural exoticism and national identity.

As Rey Chow argues, drawing on the work of cultural critic Michel de Certeau, despite the apparently radical bent of globalism, the global moment nonetheless maintains “essentialist notions of culture and history” and “conservative notions of territorial and linguistic propriety and the ‘otherness’ ensuing from them”; these notions are “new solidarities” and “are often informed by a strategic attitude which repeats what they seek to overthrow” (Writing Diaspora 17, original emphasis). For this reason, “interventions cannot simply be thought of in terms of the creation of new [strategic] ‘fields.’
Instead, it is necessary to think *primarily* in terms of borders—of borders, that is, as *para-sites* that never take over a field in its entirety but erode it slowly and *tactically*” (*Writing Diaspora* 16, original emphases). Following Chow’s thinking, Samarasan’s and Tan’s literary interventions are better characterized as tactics originating from the para-sitical interstices between host-land and homeland rather than strategies of resistance and solidarity coming from a determinate location or position. The critical thrust of their fiction writes back not only to the former colonial and Western centers but also rebounds back to the Malaysian nation-state as well. The difference here is not contradictory but contrapuntal: the strategic representation of oneself and one’s culture as exotic is, as some critics astutely observe, a recurring feature in the work of an earlier generation of postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Derek Walcott in which their self-reflexive authorial voices simultaneously acknowledge and ironically comment on their own entry into and reception within the global literary marketplace. In this sense, their self-reflexiveness is a form of what Mary Louise Pratt calls “autoethnography,” a form of writing “in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (7, original emphasis). My formulation of ethnographic tactics builds upon and extends this postcolonial autoethnography of strategic exoticism, which is an initial response of cultural self-representation and self-assertion “usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker’s own social group” (Pratt 7). Whereas their mid- and late twentieth-century predecessors such as Naipaul and Rushdie deployed self-exoticism strategically in order to stake out a position and be read and recognized in a literary field still dominated at the time by British and American authors and texts, twenty-first-century writers such as Samarasan and Tan tactically traverse an entire field or constellation of anglophone and postcolonial writing that has been growing steadily since the end of World War II and official European colonialism. This body of English-language writing has been variously named Third World, Commonwealth, postcolonial, and, more recently, world or global literature. Cosmopolitical writers adapt the resisting and reflexive strategies of their postcolonial predecessors and weave them immanently into the texture of their novels. This does not mean

1. See Walkowitz, Hayward, and Brouillette for extensive discussions of Rushdie, Naipaul, and Walcott, respectively.
that Samarasan and Tan have superseded the postcolonial; instead, it means that postcolonial thematics and tropes have become a staple of their literary vocabulary, and that they use these tropes to perform a cognitive mapping of the cosmopolitical force field of social, cultural, and political relations. Fredric Jameson makes a related point in his discussion of a geopolitical aesthetic in late twentieth-century cinema that maps out the world-system of late capital. While Jameson’s formulation is provocative, his gloss of the geopolitical as the late capitalist world-system runs the same risk as Graham Huggan’s conceptualization of the anthropological exotic in that it tends to see the economic workings of either the world-system or the global literary marketplace as a determining instance in visual or literary interpretation. A cosmopolitical aesthetic differs from a geopolitical one in that it cognitively maps out the negative dialectic between metropole, nation, and diaspora that folds the autoethnographic reflexiveness of postcolonial writing into its own ethnographic tactics and style. Critique is no longer assayed through an authorial avatar that intervenes as the narrative unfolds; instead, critique itself becomes a trope or figurative turn that is folded into the warp and woof of the literary narrative. In order to grasp the contours of their critical intervention, in the next two sections of this chapter I discuss the historical and political context of Malaysian cultural nationalism as well as the cultural discourses of diasporic subjectivity in which Samarasan and Tan both implicitly or explicitly position themselves.

**The Cultural Politics of Malaysian National Identity**

While my previous chapter focused on the heroic masculine narratives of nation-building in Malaysia and Singapore, in this chapter I wish to highlight historical dimensions of this nation-building process that Samarasan and Tan allude to in their novels, as well as the literary and linguistic dimension of the formation of a racialized, cultural national identity. Formerly colonized by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the British up until the mid-twentieth century, the country that is today called Malaysia is made up of various ethnic groups that include a majority Malay population, as well as communities of Chinese, Indian, Peranakan (ethnic Chinese who have assimilated to Malay culture and language), Eurasians (people of mixed European and Southeast Asian descent), and indigenous groups such as the Orang Asli. As historical and sociological studies of race relations in Malaysia from the colonial period up until the present day have shown (Alatas, Abraham), a pervasive sense of Malay social, cultural, and economic decline and disso-
olution was developed by British colonial authorities in the nineteenth century as part of their economic and political governance of the local Malay population. This sense, that Malay identity and social standing were under siege, was exacerbated by the influx of immigrants from southern China and southern India with the growth of the rubber and tin industries toward the turn of the century. The British assigned these new immigrants to various economic sectors (small businesses and tin mining for the Chinese, rubber plantations for the Indians), while the Malays were responsible mainly for agricultural production. The historical and contemporary perception that the Malays were intrinsically lazy and suited only for farmwork, while the Chinese and Indians were by nature more industrious and enterprising in their various businesses, is thus largely determined by the colonial economic system and its resulting social hierarchy. World War II and the Japanese occupation of British Malaya (from 1942 to 1945)—the central historical time frame of Tan’s *The Gift of Rain*—compounded the tensions between these communities: many Malays and Indians collaborated with the Japanese in hopes of getting rid of their British colonial masters, while the Chinese community bore the brunt of the Japanese military’s aggression because of their association with and financial support for mainland China, which was also at war with Japan. With the end of World War II and the formal end of British colonialism in 1957, Malaysia became an independent nation-state, and various power-sharing strategies were attempted between the three main ethnic groups. However, these attempts at forging a just and equal society for all Malaysians ran into insurmountable obstacles, because “the lower economic status of the Malay majority did not generate [. . .] a compelling critique or movement to address social inequalities,” such that “the UMNO [the dominant Malay political party] together with its alliance partners propagated a political strategy designed to secure ethnic privilege. Consequently, the integrity of self-understandings about ethnicity nurtured during colonial rule and its relationship to economic exploitation were preserved intact” (Nair 88–89). This unbroken linkage of ethnic identity and economic roles came to a head in May 1969, when after a general election, deadly race riots broke out between the Chinese and Malays in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. In its wake, Malay leaders established a set of economic and cultural policies that would secure for the Malay community the privileged status of *bumiputera* (literally “sons of the land”), and it is this post-1969 Malaysia that Samarasan depicts in *Evening Is the Whole Day*. These policies created, among other things, economic and educational advantages for the Malays so as to redress their perceived backwardness caused by British colonialism as well as Chinese and Indian economic competition. However, the *bumiputera* policy ends
up privileging ethnic and cultural rather than economic aspects: despite the
fact that some minority groups such as the Orang Asli have an equal claim
to indigenous status, they have not been recognized as bumiputera; while
many ethnic Chinese and Indian families have lived on Malaysian soil longer
than new immigrants from the neighboring country of Indonesia, the latter
are recognized as Malay and bumiputera while the former are not (Ooi 451).
At the same time, Malaysia’s national culture and national language were
equated with Malay culture and language; while the other ethnic communi-
ties were allowed to retain their local languages, instruction at all levels of
public education was to be conducted in the Malay language.

These post-1969 cultural and linguistic policies meant that Malaysia’s
national literature was defined as literature written in the national or Malay
language, that “Malay culture should form the foundation of the national
culture” (Tham 58). After 1969, various state-sponsored literary congresses
affirmed that Malaysia’s national culture “must be based on the culture of the
indigenous [Malay] communities of Malaysia” and that “literature may act as
a channel for the transmission of views, thoughts, and descriptions of mod-
ern social life in order to change and modernise Malaysia” (Tham 51). How-
ever, literary works written in English, Chinese, or Tamil were considered
“sectional literature” (Quayum and Wicks x), and the upshot was that Malay-
sian writers “in English and other languages were denied an active engage-
ment in nation building and the formation of national culture. They were
moreover denied official recognition and public acclaim in their country of
birth and citizenship,” leading to a “profound experience of marginalisation
and feelings of alienation” (Quayum and Wicks x). These policies regarding
culture, language, and literature “inscribe Malay culture and ethnic identity
as constitutive of the nation, in contrast to a more politically inclusive nation-
alism” (Nair 91), and have led many non-Malay Malaysian writers to move
overseas while still maintaining familial, cultural, and literary connections to
Malaysia from afar, writing about Malaysia in their fiction and poetry. The
biographical note in Evening Is the Whole Day tells us that Preeta Samarasan
moved to the United States after finishing high school in Malaysia, and now
resides in France; according to a similar thumbnail biography, Twan Eng Tan
divides his time between Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, and Cape Town
in South Africa. Both Samarasan and Tan are thus doubly diasporic writers:
not only are they part of a larger Chinese and South Asian diaspora, respec-
tively, they are also members of a growing community of diasporic Malaysian
writers that includes Shirley Geok-lin Lim (United States), Ee Tiang Hong
(Australia), and Tash Aw (Britain). Both their novels about Malaysia are also
published by presses based in the United States (Weinstein Books for Tan and
Mariner Books for Samarasan), which makes their writing part of a growing body of anglophone postcolonial literature written by migrant or diasporic writers, published by major presses in the West, and intended for both a Western and an Asian readership.

**Diasporic Subjectivity, Ethnographic Tactics, and the Cosmopolitical Aesthetic**

However, despite the physical and emotional distance from their homeland of Malaysia, both Samarasan and Tan evince abiding attachments with their nation-state, and it is precisely their distance that allows them to make a diasporic intervention that critiques the state of their nation and its official cultural nationalism. Diasporas, by nature of their physical distance and cultural dispersion from their homelands, are often considered in opposition to the nation, because they are “emblems of transnationalism” that “embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of the Others of the nation-state” (Tölölyan, “The Nation-State and Its Others” 6). Furthermore, studies of diasporic identities have often focused on hybridized cultural identity and deterritorialized cross-border mobility as important attributes that enable diasporic subjects to interrogate and escape from the homogenous and authoritarian national regimes (Appadurai, Clifford). My investigation of Samarasan’s and Tan’s simultaneously transnational and national literary representations of Malaysia dovetails with another area of diaspora studies that focuses on the abiding sociocultural connections between diasporas and nations, such that “diasporas may criticize their homelands but not chastise them [. . .] at its best the diaspora is an example, for both the homeland’s and hostland’s nation-states, of the possibility of living, even thriving, in the regimes of multiplicity which are increasingly a global condition” (Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s)” 7). The regimes of multiplicity of a global condition in which the homeland and hostland nation-states find themselves enmeshed and connected to one another through the mutual critique and mediation of diasporic writers such as Samarasan and Tan is another way of glossing the force field of social, cultural, and political relations mapped out by such writers in the cosmopolitical aesthetic.

Samarasan’s and Tan’s diasporic status enables their participation in a metropolitan exoticization of postcolonial or Asian countries such as Malaysia as well as their negation of such exoticism through ethnographic tactics evinced in their idiosyncratic prose style. In representing Malaysia to a Euro-American audience, both writers are, to some extent, part of a global literary
marketplace that packages writers and texts from other countries and cultures as mass commodities for consumption in the West. Furthermore, given their detailed and evocative descriptions of the physical and cultural landscape and everyday life in Malaysia, at first glance their prose may be seen as a form of “anthropological exotic” that “invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (Huggan 37). However, this exoticized representation can be problematized and understood as a critical subversion of the commodifying power of the global literary marketplace if we consider Tan and Samarasan in light of their status as diasporic writers rather than naïve and native informants. Anthropological exoticization is premised on a subjective as well as a textual mode of identity and identification: it identifies the writer with the society and culture he or she is from, and also identifies or equates the writer's textual representation with a faithful or authentic image of that sociocultural reality. Although, as Huggan points out, such anthropological exoticization is pervasive in the Euro-American marketing and reception of postcolonial literature, I argue that in the context of post-1969 literary and cultural politics, this ethnographic mode of reading and conflating imaginative writing with social and cultural realities is also part of the official Malaysian definition of national literature. This can be seen from the insistence, on the part of the nation's Malay leaders, that Malaysian national literature and culture be limited to Malay-language writing and based on Malay culture because of that community’s indigenous status and—by extension—organic link with the national imaginary; we see this also in the view (espoused by similar authorities) that literature should serve as a channel for transmitting thoughts and views, placing an “emphasis on sociological and political themes with a view to developing values and attitudes considered conducive to the objective of nation building” (Tham 43).

The cultural position of diasporic writers, however, complicates this one-to-one correspondence of subject to society and representation to reality and allows Samarasan and Tan to map out a cosmopolitical aesthetic wherein the metropolis and the national homeland are connected together through the space of diasporic cultural articulation. Stuart Hall, in the context of the Caribbean and African diaspora, argues that “cultural identities are “unstable points of identification” and “not an essence but a positioning” (“Cultural Identity” 226, original emphasis); furthermore, “diaspora identities […] are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (“Cultural Identity” 235). Similarly, Brent Hayes Edwards suggests that “the use of the term diaspora” does not
offer “an easy recourse to origins, but [. . .] forces us to reconsider the discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference” (64, original emphasis). Edwards argues for the simultaneously articulated and disjointed nature of diasporic subjectivity not simply as a concrete or substantial cultural identity but also as “a difference or gap in time (advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (shifting or displacing an object)” (65, original emphasis). The combination of Hall’s positional and transformative concept of diasporic identity together with Edwards’s more deconstructive gloss are part of the ethnographic tactics of Samarasan’s and Tan’s novels. Both writers appear to act as native informants and provide ethnographic or anthropologically exotic depictions of an essential and authentic Malaysian society and culture. On the other hand, they are also diasporic subjects who produce and reproduce their identities through transforming and differentiating various symbolic and cultural resources from both their homelands and hostlands.

Samarasan and Tan achieve this transformation and differentiation by employing the ethnographic conventions of the literary marketplace in ways that fulfill a desire for the authentic and the exotic, but also reveal the disarticulations and displacements, or the gaps and fault lines, inherent in this mode of reading and consumption. Their tactics of ethnographic writing embody and highlight the critical sutures and gaps that become visible once we recognize the overlapping national and transnational frameworks that are the conditions of possibility for their writing, and within which their novels are circulated and read. The politics of postcolonial literary space have been discussed by several critics who point out that the category of postcolonial literature is a “niche developed in tandem with general market expansion in the publishing industry,” such that “talk of saving literature from ‘reduction’ to commodity status is now scarcely possible” (Brouillette 3). In this global literary marketplace, the author-figure is part of the commodity marketed along with a work of fiction, and we should “understand strategic exoticism, and likewise general postcolonial authorial self-consciousness, as comprised of a set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality’s touristic guilt” (Brouillette 7). This holds true for postcolonial writers with a higher readership in metropolitan countries such as Salman Rushdie and J. M. Coetzee, whom Brouillette examines in her study. However, because Samarasan and Tan are writing for both a Euro-American readership and an audience in Malaysia, ethnographic tactics make a further step toward a stylistic critique of the culture industry of the global literary marketplace as well as the national (Malay-
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The culture industry neutralizes style, understood as the relation or slippage between the parts of an artwork and its whole, such that “operating only with effects, it subdues” the individual parts of an artwork “and subordinates them to the formula which supplants the work. It crushes equally the whole and the parts,” and “the whole confronts the details in implacable detachment, somewhat like the career of a successful man, in which everything serves to illustrate and demonstrate a success” (Horkheimer and Adorno 99). This can be seen from the way Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which is critical and subversive of the way in which nation-states reproduce themselves and police their boundaries through the totalizing use of narrative and historiography, can be read as a work of literary tourism with implacable detachment once it receives the accolade of the “Booker of Bookers.” The detailed parts of Rushdie’s questioning of narrative authority and historical totality are lost when the novel becomes a commodified whole that is marketed as a story that gives metropolitan readers exciting experiences and ethnographic information about India. Ethnographic tactics negate and invert the fetishizing power of the anthropological exotic not by opposing it with a more genuine or authentic style or thematic, since “the concept of a genuine style becomes transparent in the culture industry as the aesthetic equivalent of power”; thus a directly oppositional text would also, in turn, fetishize the idea of the authentic and the genuine (Horkheimer and Adorno 103). Instead, ethnographic tactics take up Horkheimer and Adorno’s suggestion that “in every work of art, style is a promise” rather than a realization, and this promise or vision is worked out through “its struggle with tradition” that eventually negates and steps beyond given reality and the status quo:

> The moment in the work of art by which it transcends reality cannot, indeed, be severed from style; that moment, however, does not consist in achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society, but in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity. (Horkheimer and Adorno 103)

The discrepancies, excesses, and apparent failures reviewers find in Saramas’ and Tan’s novels should be read in terms of the negation of the anthropological exotic’s desire for an achieved harmony and a unity of form and content, while at the same time these discrepancies and excess testify to the novels’ struggle with the tradition or earlier works of postcolonial and national literature, together with their passionate striving toward a critical
nationality that imagines the nation as a potentially just and egalitarian social formation rather than a unified community determined by a particular ethnic or religious identity. To put this another way, if Clifford Geertz (in his study of twentieth-century ethnographic writing) suggests that the ethnographer often approaches the textual representation of other cultures as both “a pilgrim and a cartographer” (10), then Samarasan and Tan write about Malaysia through the eyes of a pilferer and a cartographer. Rather than absolving or expatiating touristic guilt, these two writers’ selection and adaptation of various tropes and devices from earlier ethnographic as well as literary texts in the form of historical fiction are tactics that map out a cosmopolitical aesthetic critical of global and national narratives of collective identity premised on cultural authenticity.

The cosmopolitical aesthetic takes seriously the claims that postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature have as critical discourses always been global in their scope and vision rather than belatedly interrogating or beholden to a historical break with European colonialism. As Stuart Hall points out in a cogent survey of the field, “the term ‘post-colonial’ is not merely descriptive of ‘this’ society rather than ‘that,’ or of ‘then’ and ‘now.’ It re-reads ‘colonisation’ as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural ‘global’ process—and it produces a decentred, diasporic or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centered imperial grand narratives,” and the global, Hall further elaborates, must be understood as “lateral and transverse cross-relations” that “supplement and simultaneously dis-place the centre-periphery” as “the global/local reciprocally re-organise and re-shape one another” (“When Was the Post-Colonial?” 247). However, the global rewriting of imperialism in postcolonial texts that are supposed to be exemplars of world literature does not do away with nationalism or the nation-state, as Simon Gikandi argues: “no reading of these seminal texts is complete without an engagement with the nation-state, its history, its foundational mythologies, and its quotidian experience. To the extent that they seek to deconstruct the foundational narratives of the nation, these are world texts; yet they cannot do without the framework of the nation” (632). The paradox of supposedly world or global texts that are still animated by the framework of the nation or the impulse of nationalism is a situation Fredric Jameson explains through a geopolitical aesthetic that “attempts to fashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for our new being-in-the-world” (3), a form of cognitive mapping that “would pose the principle that all thinking today is also, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such” (4, original emphasis). However, in the geopolitical aesthetic, which is an amplified version of Jameson’s earlier and highly controversial argument about national allegory, the nation
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vanishes amidst the tensions and flows between the global and the local, between “the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes” on the one hand and “a host of partial subjects, fragmentary or schizoid constellations” that “stand in allegorically for trends and forces in the world system” on the other (5). Instead of a geopolitical aesthetic that emphasizes the emergence of landscapes, subjects, and constellations as figures through which we may trace the world-system of late capital, a cosmopolitical aesthetic focuses on the tactical positioning and articulation of these landscapes, subjects, and constellations as negations or inversions of conventional tropes of identity through which we may trace the critique of the anthropological exotic. The residual nationalism that Gikandi detects in world or global fictions should be read not as a specter to be exorcized but rather as the active presence of a cosmopolitical aesthetic that, while deconstructing the foundational narratives of the nation and national identity, evinces a critical nationality that recasts and reshapes the nation within a world or global context.

Father Figures and Diasporic Daughters in Evening Is the Whole Day

The cosmopolitical strand of Indian writing in English, or IWE (Ghosh 2), is an important literary resource that Preeta Samarasan draws on to interrogate both the anthropological exotic and Malaysian cultural nationalism. Her novel Evening Is the Whole Day shows a strong ethnographic slant as it focuses on the lives of one family in a minority community in Malaysia, tracing their rise and fall over three generations. The Rajasekharans are a family of South Indian descent living in the city of Ipoh in northern Malaysia. The father, Raju (or Appa), is a lawyer who campaigns with a socialist party for a multicultural Malaysia in 1969, but after the May 1969 riots he is politically marginalized and becomes a public prosecutor instead. His wife, Vasanthi (or Amma), is a working-class girl whom Raju wanted to mold into an educated and intellectual woman, but she is more concerned with the material trappings of middle-class life. Vasanthi is scorned and ridiculed by Paati, Raju’s mother, who lives with the family in the peacock-blue house her husband bought from a departing British rubber estate owner. Paati is looked after by Chellam, a servant whose dissolute father takes all her wages for alcohol, leaving her penniless. Chellam is also a surrogate older sister for the two younger children, Suresh and Aasha, after their real sister Uma cuts herself off from her family even as she prepares to depart for Columbia University. As the novel moves backward from 1980 to 1978 (with brief expository detours into
the early and mid-twentieth century), we discover the reason for Uma’s silent withdrawal: she is physically molested one night in 1978 by a frustrated and desperate Raju, who, it turns out, also keeps a Chinese mistress, with whom he has two children. Two years later Paati, who turns her back on Uma after seeing her victimized by Raju, dies from a fall after being pushed by her eldest granddaughter; Aasha protects Uma by framing Chellam, the servant, who is fired, sent back to her father, and later commits suicide. The novel begins with Chellam’s departure in disgrace from the house, and ends with Uma’s departure for the United States a week earlier.

Samarasan’s novel responds to a transnational, diasporic body of South Asian English-language writing by luminaries such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh as well as its own national literary predecessors in Malaysian anglophone literature. Unlike Twan Eng Tan, who is rather coy about his politics, Preeta Samarasan makes no secret of her own convictions. As she says, in Malaysia “Indians have neither the support of the government nor of a strong, successful community” (Bostonist para. 12), and that one of her “biggest motivations for writing the book” was to address several factors that have created “the culture of fear that has defined Malaysian life since 1969” (Bostonist para. 19). Additionally, Samarasan avers that her “expatriate status” in the United States enables her to achieve a critical and productive distance from Malaysia (Bakar, “Bibliobibuli” para. 14). The transnational aspect of Samarasan’s authorial subjectivity is emphasized by her acknowledged connections to other South Asian writers who have achieved international acclaim. Samarasan acknowledges that she has been “inspired by [Rushdie] on many levels” (para. 2), and, as Bishnupriya Ghosh argues in her study of contemporary Indian novelists, writers such as Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh are aware that “despite the glare of international visibility” due to their prize-winning books, they are nonetheless keen to “engage in a literary politics that interrupts their own global circulation and rejects an overt fetishistic localism” (20), which is a cognate term for what Graham Huggan calls the anthropological exotic. These cosmopolitical writers perform a “sustained interrogation of these strains of virulent nationalism that shatter the social imaginary of democratic self-rule” by “unraveling forms of reactionary cultural nationalism” (Ghosh 124) and “cutting and splicing histories” (169) as well as featuring ghostly or spectral characters in their narratives, thereby producing “uncanny discourses” that are “aimed at dislodging spatio-temporal assemblages that might culturally emplace some subjects at the cost of others” (173).

*Evening Is the Whole Day* shows that Samarasan not only resists the fetishizing localism of global literary circulation by employing the uncanny
tropes used by other cosmopolitical South Asian writers; she also uses these tropes to extend and reimagine a national consciousness expressed by a Malaysian novelist, K. S. Maniam, whose work Samarasan also recognizes as an important influence on her formation as an Indian Malaysian subject and writer (Borpujari para. 3). Maniam, a writer of Indian descent who writes in English, argues from his experience as both a child growing up in post–World War II Malaysia and a writer of fiction that the English language is a crucial and connecting medium in a polyglot postcolonial society. Although as a child Maniam attended a school where the “Anglophilic Headmaster could abolish the use of languages other than English,” this headmaster “could not interfere with the kind of bridging that happened between boys who came from various home languages and cultures. In a strange sort of way, the English language on our young and flexible tongues, did bring us together, the children of the various communities in Malaysia on some neutral ground” (“In Search of a Centre” para. 9). Moreover, despite the fears of the Malaysian government that English would dilute or degrade the native cultures and languages of various ethnic communities, Maniam—in terms that recall Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s discussion of multilogical rather than monological worlds—asserts that his schooling in English made him aware “that it wasn’t possible to have just one centre in our lives. In the school compound we spoke and wrote in English. [. . .] When we left the school compound for the day, we left one centre behind and re-entered another: the centre ruled by our own languages and cultures” (“In Search of a Centre” para. 10). The multilingual and polycentric situation of Maniam’s childhood and education in Malaysia proves central to his identification as a Malaysian subject rather than an Indian or South Asian diasporic individual when he studies abroad in Britain in the 1960s, because “the community in that Malayan Teachers’ College [in Britain] was truly a Malaysian society in that everyone, irrespective of race, religion and culture shared the common spirit of living together. There were hardly any racial or cultural prejudices. For a would-be writer, this experience was not only necessary but vital, for it allowed him entry into other personalities, cultures and languages,” and this was possible because “it was the English language that forged that close and common bond among” Maniam and his fellow Malaysian teacher-trainees in Britain (“In Search of a Centre” para. 15–16). The common bond that Maniam feels with his fellow Malaysians while studying abroad in Britain expresses a critical nationalism that works through religious, cultural, and linguistic differences in an effort to share a common life, and it contradicts the state mandate that “Malay culture should form the foundation of the national culture” (Tham 58). However, while Maniam maps out an autobiographical trajectory for the
Malaysian writer that moves from diaspora toward nationalism, this move runs the danger of conflating national consciousness with national identity as Maniam’s writerly persona becomes identified with the nation as a whole at the expense of other voices or communities that may be playing an active role in the political and cultural process of negotiating the nation. Samarasani parts ways with her literary predecessor by insisting that the nation needs to be imagined not only by those inside it but also by those who maintain a critical and diasporic distance outside it; she eschews Maniam’s autobiographical trajectory of national narration in favor of intrinsic and extrinsic ethnographic tactics.

*Evening Is the Whole Day,* like novels by other diasporic South Asian writers, has been read ethnographically and exotically: a *New York Times* reviewer praises Samarasani for giving readers “the long slow banquet of a fine novel” that promises more than “news, history, [and] travel blogs” about “far away locales” (Goodman para. 1). Similarly, a Malaysian reviewer celebrates the novel as one that “embraces you entirely, seizing your senses and emotions” (Manickam para. 1) with “rich imagery” (para. 2). *Evening Is the Whole Day* indeed offers evocative descriptions of the landscapes and lives of Malaysia and its people, and the opening passage has the tone of an ethnographic study offering the reader a literary tour of Peninsular Malaysia, the landmass of which is described as “stretching delicate as a bird’s head” (Samarasani 1). Samarasani also offers a vivid account of Malaysia’s tropical rainfall and its effect on people’s everyday life that bears quoting at length to show its full sensory and kinesthetic details:

> These are the most familiar rains, the violent silver ropes that flood the playing fields and force office workers to wade to bus stops in shoes that fill like buckets. Blustering and melodramatic, the afternoon rains cause traffic jams at once terrible—choked with the black smoke of lorries and the screeching brakes of schoolbuses—and beautiful: aglow with winding lines of watery yellow headlights that go on forever, with blue streetlamps reflected in burgeoning puddles, with the fluorescent melancholy of empty roadside stalls. (Samarasani 1)

A concise yet highly evocative sketch of ordinary city life in the midst of a tropical downpour that takes us from the choking heat of day to the quiet solitude of night, this opening passage displays Samarasani’s considerable ethnographic flair, but a stylistic twist surfaces in the deft personification of the rain-soaked cityscape as at once “blustering and melodramatic” as well as “beautiful” and “melancholy.” Malaysia is a seething landscape of intensities
and affect that cannot be leisurely consumed as an ethnographic tableau. Moreover, at the end of the passage we are reminded that “every day appears to begin with a blaze and end with this deluge, so that past and present and future run together in an infinite, steaming river” (1). Such a summation would not seem significant were it not for one of the epigraphs of the novel taken from British writer Graham Swift’s Booker-Prize-winning 1984 novel *Waterland*: “History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret. So that hard on the heels of the word Why comes the sly and wistful word If” (106). Swift’s novel, set in the marshy region of northeast England known as The Fens, is regarded as a landmark work of historiographic metafiction, a genre of contemporary writing in which fiction self-reflexively comments upon and brackets historiography in order to achieve “not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history” (Hutcheon 117–18). Samarasan uses the slyness and wistfulness of the conditional “If” in her epigraph from Swift to point toward her exploration of alternative narratives and subjectivities that are unacknowledged by official versions of postcolonial history and cultural nationalism. Her evocation of Swift’s novel is an act of literary cosmopolitics that draws on the cultural capital of *Waterland* and its popularization of historiographic metafiction among an Anglo-American reading public. Her ethnographic tactics literally take a leaf out of Graham Swift’s book of historiographic metafiction, inverting the anthropological exotic’s simultaneously distancing yet familiarizing gaze through the problematized inscribing of her subjects in an ethnographic mode.

The ethnographic gaze was one powerful means of knowledge production and sociocultural control the British colonizers exerted over their subjects, and Samarasan’s strategic thrust in her novel is aimed at the residual but unattenuated presence of such a colonial ethnography and its derivative ideas of racial and cultural superiority or inferiority even in postcolonial, independent Malaysia. These ethnographic stereotypes continue to inform the nation-state’s official cultural nationalism and the formation of its national identity, and it is to their lingering existence, rather than the failure of a critical national consciousness, that the social tensions in present-day Malaysia may be attributed. Immediately after the highly evocative opening paragraph, the novel reveals that “in truth, though, there are days that do not blaze and rains less fierce,” and how the sight of “grey mist” and “glowing green hills [. . .] must have reminded the old British rulers of their faraway country” (Samarasan 2). The sudden reference to Malaysia’s old British rulers in a section that is time-stamped “September 6, 1980” (1) signals that British colonialism and its legacy continues to haunt the nation even after official
independence in 1957, and that the novel is less a historically realistic presentation of Malaysian life and culture than a narrative of the past represented through a mist of memories and desires. The persistent presence of British colonialism and its aftereffects in Malaysia are represented by the physical structure of the Rajasekharans’ Big House, the ghosts who inhabit it, and the use of racial stereotypes by the different ethnic communities against each other during the May 1969 riots. The Rajasekharans live in a house bought by Raju’s father from Mr McDougall, a rubber estate owner who despises the locals and leaves Malaysia just before independence. McDougall is part of the British governing class, who, “like God [. . .] had watched their word take miraculous material form, [with] Malay and Chinese and Indian stepping up unquestioningly to fill the roles invented for them” by the colonizers (21), thus foreshadowing the racial riots that would take place in 1969 as a result of the inability of the newly decolonized community to break free of the roles created for them by the British. Against this unrelenting colonial bigotry, Raju’s father, Tata, tries to efface McDougall’s “conservative taste” (26) by adding his own architectural extensions, but the consequence of Tata’s renovations is that the house “metamorphosed into something out of an Enid Blyton bedtime story” (23). This reference to the famous British author of children’s literature suggests that Tata’s attempts at assimilating the house to a local Malaysian aesthetic are not only childish; they also disguise the fact that something British stubbornly remains beneath the renovated surface of the Big House and the new nation of Malaysia. Furthermore, echoing the hubris of Mr McDougall’s godlike observational stance, Tata’s purchase and installment of electric lights in the Big House is closely connected to the birth of the new nation-state of Malaysia. At the very moment of midnight on August 31, 1957, when “Tunku Abdul Rahman [Malaysia’s first Prime Minister] raised his right arm high on a colonial cricket ground and saluted the country’s new freedom,” Tata flips a new switch in the Big House and “there was Light,” with the biblical allusion repeated at the scene of national independence: “The blazing Light of a dozen fluorescent streetlamps, the crackling Light of a hundred flashing cameras, the (metaphorical, now, but no less real) inner Light of pride and ambition that shone in a million patriotic breasts just as it had shone in other breasts at other midnights” (25). In this passage, Samarasan’s literary cosmopolitics frames a critique of national identity with the allusion to Salman Rushdie’s historiographical interrogation of India’s national independence in *Midnight’s Children*. The capitalization of the word “light,” with its connotations of biblical truth and universal enlightenment, is both foreshadowing and ironic. In contrast to the beauty and melancholy of the ambient city lights in the opening passage, here we see the conflation of
the blazing, crackling light of streetlamps and camera flashes with pride and ambition associated with patriotism rather than nationalism or national consciousness, foreshadowing the future clashes between Malays and Chinese over the pride and privilege associated with ethnic or cultural nationalism rather than critical nationality. Light becomes instrumentalized as spectacle, just as the nation becomes an identity rather than a social formation.

Nowhere is this residual and pernicious aftereffect of British colonial power more evident than in the novel’s stylized description of the May 1969 riots, during which the racial profiles used by the British resurface with a vengeance as various ethnic groups in Malaysia turn against each other in the wake of an election that saw Raju’s, or Appa’s, coalition party making substantial political gains against the dominant Malay majority faction. Unlike Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who traces the indirect effects of the riots through her protagonist Li An’s thoughts and feelings while she spends a night of passion with Chester, Samarasan captures the frenzied anger and violence of the entire country, depersonalizing the events by paradoxically anthropomorphizing the growing social tensions through two figures, Rumor and Fact: “three days after the election, Rumor and Fact burst forth into the noonday Kuala Lumpur heat, Rumor in a red dress, Fact in coat tails, and together they began a salacious tango in the streets” (120). The salacious tango here alludes to a reference made by Li An in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Joss and Gold, in which she remarks that her friend Abdullah’s explanation of Malay special rights in a multiethnic country seemed “like a good partner observing the patterns and courtesies of an elaborate dance” (Joss and Gold 45). In Evening Is the Whole Day, however, this elaborate dance of race relations between willing and well-behaved partners spins dangerously out of control, as “the stories that Rumor and Fact spun together poured like lava through the city” and these stories, which seem to have no discernible source and no means of verification, heighten the animosity between the Malay and non-Malay communities as each begins to intensify its stereotypes of the others:

fourteen non-Malay opposition members had been elected in the state of Selangor alone; these Gerakan and Democratic Action Party victors were going to strip the Malays of their God-given scholarships and housing loans and job quotas, [. . .] the Chinese were going to grab Selangor for themselves, just as they’d grabbed Singapore, as if their pockets weren’t bulging enough already; the frightened gomen [government] had gunned down a Chinese Labor Party activist for no reason. And the Indians? They’d staged a drunken midnight demonstration, an excuse for a brawl, really, so typical of those bloody booze-guzzling estate coolies. (Samarasan 121)
Through the use of semicolons, Samarasan presents the hatred and violence sweeping through Malaysia with an ethnographic turn that reveals how these racial and racist sentiments are discursive forces for which one person or group—whether Malay, Chinese, or Indian—cannot be held culpable. Rather than providing a detailed, objective study of contemporary race relations or tracing the tumultuous events through the eyes of one or a few characters, Samarasan pulls us back from the raw intensity of the racial violence and instead draws our attention to the wellspring of Malaysians’ racist vocabulary:

every man, Chinese, Indian, and Malay, forgot his contempt for the views of the departed British and savored the taste of his old masters’ 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, relying on the old, familiar combinations, patting each other on the back to applaud their own initiative, encouraging the back rows of the classroom to rise to the challenge. (Samarasan 121, original emphasis)

The analogy of Malaysians as students schooled in the vocabulary of racial stereotypes in the classroom of British colonialism underscores how “the concept of independence and of Malaysia itself was configured by the colonial project. Both the British and the Malay political community found themselves in a defensive position and the political discourses that grew out of that period […] were expressions of such a state of mind” (Ooi 459). In a literary inversion of the pride and ambition of patriotism displayed in 1957 at the earlier moment of national independence, the May 1969 riots illustrate the defensive belligerence of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians that stems from the colonial discourse of ethnocentric chauvinism and economic exploitation. To read this as a failure of the national project would, however, be erroneous. The novel suggests that anticolonial nationalism has not so much failed as it has not been given a chance to succeed or properly take shape. The unyielding power of the racial and economic divisions created by the British colonial system prevented an economically equitable and socially egalitarian national community from emerging, instead installing an instrumental, cultural nationalism that was focused on producing and reproducing a national identity of Malay dominance.

The official narrative of national independence and progress is centered on Raju Rajasekharan, who, like the Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, went to university in Britain, earned a law degree, and enters politics with the fervent hope of creating “a Malaya for all Malaysians” regardless of their ethnic origins (Samarasan 44). However, Samarasan reveals the problems inherent
in such nation-building projects centered on heroic and masculine figures. While Raju hopes to create a better society, he also harbors an equally strong desire for self-aggrandizement: “Marriage was part of his first five-year plan, which was itself every bit as determined, purposeful, and specific as the nation’s own. […] To Malaya, the Party would bring prosperity and peace, and to Appa, great glory both public and private” (44). Raju sees his domestic prosperity as synonymous with his nation-building project to the extent that his choice of Vasanthi as his wife, because of her “awkwardness” and “simplicity,” stems from his belief that marrying her would mean “taking on the real work of nation-building” (62). Vasanthi’s “lack of experience” and apparent innocence makes her the perfect candidate to “bloom under his expert tutelage” (54) and his “power to exalt and educate” (93) her in romantic and intellectual matters. Raju’s equation of nation-building with wife-molding is critiqued by Deniz Kandiyoti’s study of women and nationalist movements; such movements often “reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse” (380) and associate “women with the private domain” in a way that “reinforces the merging of the nation/community with the selfless mother/devout wife,” thus hindering “their emergence as full-fledged citizens” (382). However, Vasanthi has no interest in national politics or intellectual edification and is keener on entering the fashionable world of the Malaysian middle class, adopting the motto that “in the end all that matters is money” (Samarasan 102, original emphasis). Raju’s unsuccessful educational project at home is paralleled by his political failure after the May 1969 riots and the disbanding of his party, and he chooses “personal glory” over “the last of his ideals,” swallowing his pride to become a public prosecutor for the government (135).

The triumphant narrative of an independent and multiracial Malaysia, represented by patriarchal figures such as Raju, his father Tata, and the Prime Minister (Samarasan 20), is disrupted and undermined by the haunting inequalities left behind by colonialism in the specters of Mr McDougall’s daughter and Paati, whose stories are left out of the official narrative of national independence and who “figure a nonsynchronism that is opposed to the empty homogenous time of history proper” (Ghosh 167). These two ghosts haunt the Big House and remind us of the spectral residue of colonialism: the first is Mr McDougall’s daughter with his Chinese mistress, and the second is Paati herself, Raju’s mother. When the Scotsman who originally owned the Big House refused to acknowledge his Chinese mistress and her daughter before he returned to Britain, the Chinese woman drowned herself and the little girl in a double suicide (Samarasan 18, 270). The nameless little
girl’s haunting of the Big House is a reminder of the subordinate status and inferior treatment of local women by the colonizers, and of the rejection of hybrid children of mixed parentage who are the inevitable products of the colonial encounter. Paati’s ghost also attests to this ineradicable colonial presence, for in life she was extremely sympathetic toward the British, weeping “for the Englishmen who would be booted out unceremoniously for the supposed sins of their fathers” and saying on the eve of Malaysian independence that “when the British are really gone for good, we’ll miss them” (23).

Samarasan’s critique of this apparently selfless but actually self-serving patriarchal nationalism is further underscored by her cutting and splicing of Raju’s story with those of two other women: Chellam, the servant, and Uma, Raju’s daughter. In the first chapter of the novel, Samarasan compares and contrasts the two. “Chellam is eighteen years old, the same age as Uma,” but the differences in their education, economic, and social status quickly become obvious. It is only after the novel details the departure of these two women that Raju’s rise and fall as a political figure is revealed, and as the novel moves back toward 1978 from 1980, Samarasan exposes Raju’s moral bankruptcy as both the head of the household and an employer. Raju gives all of Chellam’s monthly wages to her drunkard father, Muniandy, in order to avoid a scene that would tarnish his middle-class respectability (Samarasan 255), an act which goes against his original socialist principles and smacks of cowardice (168–69). Uma, on the other hand, is the apple of her father’s eye, whose ”heart was as beautiful as her face” (283) and exudes an inner strength that Raju “loved,” “admired,” and also “feared” (284). Uma appears to be the female paragon that Raju wanted to turn his wife Vasanthi into, and she becomes the object of Raju’s desire in ways that emphasize his need to control and shape those around him. As he molest his daughter, Raju detects a “childlike smell” from her “that was his most devastating punishment, this reminder that what he’d done, he’d done to the child Uma had once been, the child she still was” (301). Through Raju’s actions, Samarasan criticizes a version of nationalism that appears to be egalitarian and committed to social justice but inevitably privileges male subjects who govern the country as they do their families. This version of nationalism portrays women “as victims of their societies’ backwardness, symbols of the nation’s newly found vigour and modernity or the privileged repository of uncontaminated national values” (Kandiyoti 388), and ultimately fails by either turning against itself and committing violence against the women who symbolically exemplify its virtues (in Uma’s case), or by ignoring or rationalizing the plight of the poor and underprivileged as a necessary part of the nation’s social stratification (in Chellam’s case). Furthermore, Raju’s incestuous assault on his own
daughter is Samarasan’s scathing judgment on a cultural nationalism that strictly polices the boundaries between the Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities. If, as Kandiyoti argues, women are identified as “privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities” (388), then Uma’s victimization at her father’s hands takes the endogenous logic of cultural nationalism to an extreme but inevitable conclusion: the best way to maintain the homogeneity and purity of one’s community is to reproduce it with those who are closest in blood and lineage.

Samarasan’s critique of Malaysian nationalism becomes clearer if we understand *Evening Is the Whole Day* as a response to *The Return*, a novel written by an older Indian Malaysian writer, K. S. Maniam. Maniam’s novel, like *Evening*, follows a three-generation immigrant Indian family through the narration of Ravi, a schoolteacher, who recalls the arrival from India of his grandmother, Periathai. Periathai builds a house and carves many scenes from the Indian epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata onto its pillars. After she dies, the municipal authorities want to demolish the house, and her son (Ravi’s father) Naina tries, in vain, to stop them. Naina immolates himself in a final act of defiance, and the novel closes with English-educated Ravi writing an elegiac poem commemorating his father. *The Return* stages a symbolic turn away from diasporic Indian toward a national, Malaysian identity through the deaths of Periathai and Naina and the destruction of the house with its carved pillars, along with Ravi’s anglophone and anglophile education. Ravi is “representative of the boy growing into adulthood with unquestioning loyalty to whatever is new” (Maniam, “Fiction into Fact” 266), and his “personality represents an aggressive, intellectualised attitude and consequently is reductive in its scope” (Maniam, “Fiction into Fact” 267), as opposed to the double consciousness of his grandmother and father, who try to adapt Indian cultural practices to Malaysia. Ravi represents, like Raju in *Evening*, a new national consciousness, but whereas Maniam expresses a cautious optimism that the turn away from a diasporic identity will help ethnic Indians better integrate into Malaysian society, Samarasan is less hopeful because of the prevailing social order that still emphasizes impenetrable racial boundaries. Therefore, it is no surprise that Uma, who represents the next generation after Raju and Ravi, leaves for Columbia University in America, turning away from the nation and becoming part of the diaspora. Uma’s selection of a double major in biology and theater on her college application form (Samarasan 325) marks her decision to break out of the biological determinism of racial identity and “ethnic absolutism” (Gilroy 2) in Malaysia toward a more performative and flexible concept of identity. As her sister Aasha remarks upon seeing Uma’s application form, “Uma’s
won. Uma’s going to do what she pleases and there’s nothing anyone can do about it” (Samarasan 325). Uma’s theatrical aspirations recall the dramatic vocabulary Stuart Hall uses to describe diasporic identity: identity is not “an already accomplished fact” but a “‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 222), and “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (225). Although the novel ends without any exposition of Uma’s time in the United States, Uma’s imminent adoption of a diasporic subjectivity offers a glimmer of hope in a novel otherwise shot through with unrelenting disillusionment and despair about the politics of Malaysia’s cultural nationalism. But the novel is, in the end, still closely linked to Malaysia, even if Uma leaves the nation behind. As Samarasan says in an interview, *Evening Is the Whole Day* is to a large extent “Appa’s [Raju’s] story. The story of his disenchantment and apathy—which is the story of middle-class Malaysian Indians” (Stameshkin para. 32). Samarasan ultimately points out that the project of creating a Malaysian nation-state based on social justice and equal opportunities for all its constituent groups is not yet complete even with the end of British colonialism and the achievement of formal independence. Other perspectives and voices, such as those of the underprivileged Chellam and the diasporic Uma, must be taken into account in order to balance and revise the patriarchal nationalist discourse of father figures such as Raju.

**Claiming the Nation through Hybridity in *The Gift of Rain***

If Preeta Samarasan is in dialogue with cosmopolitical South Asian as well as nationalist Indian Malaysian writers, Twan Eng Tan rehearses a historically rich tradition of anthropological writing as well as contemporary British literature in his novel *The Gift of Rain*. Penang, a city on a small island located off the western coast of Malaysia, is the setting for the novel, which moves between two time periods: first, 1939 to 1945, during which British-held Malaya was conquered by the Japanese Imperial Army, which in turn surrendered to the victorious Allied forces at the end of World War II; second, the late 1990s, during which Penang is a rapidly modernizing city. Philip Hutton, the narrator, is the child of a British businessman and a Chinese woman, and his mixed parentage causes him to be isolated in both the European and Asian communities in colonial Malaya. In the later time frame Philip, the sole surviving member of the Hutton family, is an old man who is about to retire from his family’s trading company but who uses his
wealth for the historical restoration of many colonial-era houses in Penang. A Japanese woman, Michiko Murakami, visits him and reveals that she once loved his good friend and mentor Hayato Endo, or Endo-san. Philip reminisces and narrates the earlier time frame of the story, in which he is a sixteen-year-old who befriends Endo-san, the Japanese vice-consul in British colonial Malaya. Philip learns aikido and the Japanese language from Endo-san while unwittingly passing along strategic information about Malaya that eventually helps the Japanese military defeat the British in 1942. Because of his fluency in various local languages and Japanese, and out of a desire to protect his family, Philip becomes Endo-san’s lieutenant in the new regime. He unwillingly assists the Japanese secret police in their atrocities against the locals, but secretly helps save as many civilians as he can by passing on information to the resistance made up of Malayan Communist forces and the British-led Malaya People’s Anti-Japanese Army. His espionage is discovered, but his father asks to be executed by Endo-san in his stead while Philip is placed under house arrest. He is finally released when British troops arrive to reclaim Malaya in 1945. However, the novel takes a spiritual turn: Philip and Endo-san were lovers in their past lives, and they are locked in a romantic but deadly cycle of reincarnation in which Endo-san always ends up killing Philip. By training Philip in aikido and the Japanese language and making him his assistant, Endo-san tries to break this cycle of love and destruction by reconciling their two lives, but with the defeat of Japan and his imminent trial as a war criminal, Endo-san asks Philip to kill him instead, thereby breaking the fateful circle by reversing their roles. Philip does so, and retreats into a semi-reclusive existence, alternatively hated and admired by the people of Penang, who view him either as a cowardly traitor or as a pragmatic survivor who defied the Japanese. The novel ends in the present day with Michiko’s death (from radiation sickness caused by the atomic bombing of Nagasaki) and Philip contemplating his remaining days.

While at first glance appearing to fulfill the anthropological exotic of the global literary marketplace, The Gift of Rain evokes but also inverts important literary and cultural tropes and stereotypes associated with ethnographic narratives and colonial adventure stories and travelogues about the Orient and the Far East. Tan’s novel gestures toward two literary traditions. First, as one reviewer observes, it evokes Joseph Conrad and other fin-de-siècle British fiction about the decline of the British empire in Malaya with its “exotic Eastern location,” “rich lushness,” and “good old-fashioned,

2. The term “Malaya” is used here to refer to the territory under British colonialism, whereas “Malaysia” denotes the country after its formal independence in 1957.
masculine, ripping yarn” (Jordison para. 6). Second, it is also part of a large body of work about the Japanese occupation that combines “familiar horrific stereotypical” descriptions of “the brutal image of the fierce Japanese warrior” (Klein 176) with a “sympathetic portrayal” of the “human side of the soldiers as well as the benevolence of many of the civilians” (177). Ronald D. Klein argues that this type of writing, as a record of the horrors of war as well as of the “tactics of survival and the character it produced,” plays an important part “in the forging of a national identity” in both Malaysia and Singapore (179). Furthermore, Tan’s novel echoes ethnographic accounts of the Japanese such as Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in its descriptions of their social mores. Many Japanese characters are presented in an ethnographic fashion with perplexingly contradictory traits: Goro, a military officer, has a “sublime” taste for classical music matched by a sadistic desire for violence, killing an innocent man for not showing an antique piano “proper care” (Tan 296, 297); Saotome, the Japanese ambassador, is both a philosopher who enjoys his Zen rock garden and a pederast who enjoys young Chinese girls and lusts after Philip himself (287–88). Finally, Endo-san repeatedly stresses the importance of duty to the Japanese: “If we fail in our duty, we fail our country, and our family,” he tells Philip, and continues, with an air of resignation, “It has always been so in our way of life. One cannot escape it” (89, original emphasis). These descriptions of the Japanese, a mixture of social obligations with wanton violence and decadent perversion, appear to be an index of how the Japanese think and behave, and they highlight how different the Japanese are from both the colonial British and the local Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Read in this light, Tan’s writing echoes Ruth Benedict’s anthropological study of the Japanese that explains how “the Japanese themselves saw certain violent swings of behavior as integral parts of a system” (19) and “examines Japanese assumptions about the conduct of life” (13). The ethnographic gaze also extends to the non-Japanese characters in the book by highlighting aspects of their personalities that correspond to cultural or racial profiles. Kon, Philip’s Chinese friend and fellow *aikido* exponent, is a hot-blooded youth and son of a powerful Chinese triad (gangster) boss who joins the resistance against the Japanese, but is ultimately betrayed by the Chinese girl he loves and killed by the Chinese resistance leader, who is afraid of losing “face” or honor because of Kon’s growing popularity (Tan 383–84). Noel Hutton, Philip’s father, refuses to leave Penang with the rest of the Europeans out of a British sense of fair play and dignity; as he says to Philip, “We’ll keep the flag flying. We’ll keep our family name untainted, and we will not lose face” (273), displaying the “stiff upper lip” attitude often associated with gentlemanly British behavior. Tan
also sprinkles impressive descriptions of the Malayan landscape that contribute to this ethnographic effect: on the opening page we see “rain [. . .] smearing the landscape into a Chinese brush painting” and how “the scent of grass wove through the air like threads entwining with the perfume of flowers, creating an intricate tapestry of fragrance” (1), and at the end of the novel the elderly Philip experiences a flash of insight, which he experiences “with the delicacy of a butterfly entering the reveries of the venerable Chinese philosopher, as though alighting on the most fragile of petals” (431). Even the homoerotic affection between Philip and Endo-san is described in terms of a fierce duel between honorable warriors: “that evening he used his katana against me in his violent ways and I responded in kind. [. . .] My sword received his force with equal hunger and I opened myself up to him as clouds open up to the sun” (308). The effect of the abundance of historical detail and rich, Orientalist descriptions has not gone unremarked: one reviewer observes that it is a “Malaysian novel aimed at an international readership” and, as such, makes itself accessible by providing “a great deal of information on the complex social background of the country” (Bakar, “It’s a BIG Book” para. 8) and also “unashamedly draw[ing] on romantic Oriental elements like the deliberate chinoiserie of the imagery [. . .] and the delicate motifs of insects” (para. 11). Another reviewer, also noting that Tan’s descriptions and chinoiserie are “psychotically tasteful” (Lake para. 7), even goes so far as to propose that the novel “might perhaps have been more naturally realised in a decent Manga production” (para. 8). The idea that Tan’s book might be better suited to the medium of Japanese graphic novels suggests that The Gift of Rain succeeds—perhaps too well—in fulfilling a Western or metropolitan readership’s desire for the anthropological exotic in fiction about East Asian cultures and countries.

However, the comment that Tan’s descriptive prose is “psychotically tasteful” suggests that there is more afoot than a simple anthropological exoticization of colonial Malaya for an audience hungry for foreign fare. Tan acknowledges Kazuo Ishiguro as a model for his own writing (Tam para. 32), and Ishiguro admits that his Booker-Prize-winning novel The Remains of the Day is very much a work of posed ethnicity because it “has the tone of a very English book, but actually [he is] using that as a kind of shock tactic” to create “a super-English novel. It’s more English than English” (Vorda and Herzinger 12, original emphasis). Ishiguro uses this affected style of super-Englishness to criticize the “enormous nostalgia industry” in Britain during the 1980s (Vorda and Herzinger 14). Similarly, Tan’s chinoiserie and “stilted dialogue” (Law-Yone para. 6) are a self-conscious critique of the essentialism inherent in the anthropological exotic of the global literary marketplace and
that also exists in the present-day Malaysian government’s racialization of national literature and culture that subordinates Chinese and Indian communities in favor of Malay interests. Just as Ishiguro creates a narrator in Stevens the butler who seems quintessentially and excessively English, Tan uses the principles of aikido in the novel for his own tactic of foregrounding but also simultaneously inverting the anthropological exotic. Endo-san advises Philip to face an opponent by not “meet[ing] the force of the strike head-on,” and instead “step[ping] to the side to avoid the blow,” and “redirect[ing] the force”; if Philip can “deflect, distract” his opponent, “even agree with him,” then Philip can “unbalance” his opponent’s mind and “lead him anywhere [he] want[s]” (Tan 52). The psychotic edge of Tan’s tasteful descriptions and his stilted dialogue correspond to the anthropological exotic but actually unbalance it, redirecting the momentum of his readers’ desire for the exotic back at them, just as Endo-san reminds Philip: “Redirect your opponent’s momentum back into himself” (164, original emphasis). In other words, in The Gift of Rain Tan has created a super-exotic novel, one that is more Oriental than the Orient, and his reviewers’ complaints about Tan’s descriptions and dialogue must be considered in light of this deliberate excess of Orientalist signification rather than as a failed attempt at cultural authenticity.

Tan’s super-Oriental exoticism unbalances the fetishizing power of the anthropological exotic with its treatment of historical fact and Philip Hutton’s fictitious role in events of World War II. The novel would have us understand that Philip passed along information to Endo-san about accessible roads through the local jungle (Tan 265) and the ocean tides and weather pattern along Malaya’s coast (300) that enabled the Japanese army’s swift advance and victory. Philip is also present at the formal surrender of Penang to the Japanese military (278–79), and his collaboration with the Japanese regime echoes the cooperation that took place between many Malayans (especially among the Malays and Indians) and the Japanese forces (Andaya and Andaya 258–61). Furthermore, Philip’s own family background links him to another period of historical upheaval. His maternal grandfather, Wu An Khoo, is supposed to have been a tutor and friend to an emperor of China, Wen Zu, who preceded the last Manchu emperor Pu Yi, but “all records and traces” of Wen Zu were destroyed by the Empress Dowager such that “he never existed in history” (Tan 123). Grandpa Khoo mysteriously disappears into the Malayan hills after giving Philip a jade pin he used to test for poisons in their food (365–66); this jade pin was originally possessed by one of the Five Ancestor monks who were disciples of Bodhiddharma (119), the legendary monk who brought Buddhism to China and Japan and vanished “after ten years of continuous meditation” (111). This mixture of historical fact with reli-
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Religious mysticism seems credible enough, as one reviewer praises the novel for “describing a place and time that is at once vividly real and fantastically alien” and “instantly transporting the reader to a destination that only exists in fading memories and imagination” (Donaghy para. 3). However, in his author’s note at the end of the book, Tan reveals that he has “taken certain liberties with events”: the surrender of Penang (and by extension Endo-san and Philip Hutton’s role in the war) and the “Forgotten Emperor” Wen Zu are all products of Tan’s “dramatic license” (433). The success of the anthropological exotic depends on a seamless combination of the familiar and the strange: the strangeness here being the supernatural love story of Philip and Endo-san locked in a cycle of love and death, as well as the legend of Bodhidharmo, the Forgotten Emperor, and Grandpa Khoo’s disappearance; the familiar is brought to us by the historical time frames of the novel (British colonial Malaya, World War II, China’s Qing dynasty). But Tan’s ethnographic tactics invert this anthropological exotic, and this discomfiting inversion can be seen from complaints that his prose is psychotically tasteful, that the characters’ dialogue is stilted, and that certain passages sound “like a cut-and-paste from Wikipedia” (Jordison para. 9) or like “clumsily introduced historical explanations” (para. 10). Rather than seeing these as flaws in Tan’s writing style, we should understand the overwrought and ostentatious parts of the novel as disarticulations or interruptions in the textual body of the Orient created in the imaginations of metropolitan readers. These disarticulations haunt and disturb the anthropological exotic, because they remind readers that there is no essential or authentic Japan or Malaya lying behind or beneath the novel’s ethnographic detail and atmospheric vividness. This deconstructive thrust can be seen from a key episode in the middle of the novel, where Philip experiences a moment of pure enlightenment, or sartori. While visiting Philip’s room, Endo-san remarks that Philip has copied one of his own paintings of the monk Bodhidharmo (Tan 218), but Endo-san’s painting is itself a copy of a painting by Musashi Miyamoto (42), which is itself a graphical rendition of a monk who vanished into thin air, out of history and into legend. Philip suddenly experiences a moment of “complete clarity and total contentment” that he will seek to recapture for the rest of his life (219). The complete clarity that Philip experiences and hunger for parallels the transparency and unmediated nature of the anthropological exotic that “gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (Huggan 37). But in Tan’s novel, what lies at the heart of this search for total contentment is a series of representations pointing toward a constitutive absence that cannot be grasped or filled—Philip’s enlightenment is centered upon a copy of a copy of a painting of a monk who vanished into thin air. In contrast to Ruth
Benedict’s ethnographic account of the Japanese, Tan’s ethnographic tactics in *The Gift of Rain* do not explicate a core set of features or characteristics of the Japanese or Malayan way of life to its readers, nor do they transport us to a vividly real and fantastically alien time and place. Instead, the novel uses our desire for what is foreign and exotic to evoke plausible and conventional Orientalist and historical impressions and then unbalance the momentum of our reading. It is a moment not of complete clarity or contentment but of diasporic disarticulation within a cosmopolitical aesthetic. It is a conjoining of Kazuo Ishiguro’s posed ethnicity and super-English writing style with historical events in colonial Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia and with national and cultural stereotypes that interrupts and withholds any fulfillment of exotic expectations and questions the terms upon which we as readers desire knowledge of and fetishize other cultures and peoples through our reading.

This cosmopolitical thrust of Tan’s fictional critique of the anthropological exotic in the global literary marketplace is matched by an equally unbalancing critique of the logic and politics of official cultural nationalism in postcolonial Malaysia from a queer diasporic standpoint. It is important to note that the novel’s half-British, half-Chinese narrator, Philip Hutton, is not only biracial but also queer, as he and Endo-san are lovers who have been locked in a cycle of death and rebirth across centuries. Philip is a narrator and protagonist who inverts the heteronormative and reproductive roles promoted by official nationalism, as he never marries or has any children, and his lover is one of the generally reviled and demonized Japanese imperial aggressors. Philip is situated both within and without the colonial history of Malaya, as he is a character who exists in the time frames presented by the novel as well as a reborn soul “stepping out of the flow of time” (Tan 11) who thus offers the possibility or promise of unsettling and reconceptualizing what Benedict Anderson (citing Walter Benjamin) calls the “homogeneous empty time” of the nation (Anderson 24). Moreover, in addition to his British and Chinese heritage and his fluency in the local tongues of Hokkien and Malay, Philip turns out to be Japanese as well, for in his past life he was executed by his friend and lover Endo-san because he “betrayed the Shogun’s government by providing information to the rebels” in the same way that he now passes information to the anti-Japanese resistance fighters in occupied Malaya (Tan 307). While the novel describes Endo-san’s and Philip’s relationship as a complex layering of affection between father and son, teacher and student, and romantic lovers, their emotional and physical intimacy is always haunted by and mixed in with the fearful dilemma of remaining loyal to and betraying their respective communities and countries, while at the same time making an “attempt at redemption” while locked in a “cycle of pain” (218).
Endo-san wishes to train and recruit Philip as his protégé so that Philip may work for the Japanese imperial government in Malaya and thus break the cycle of death and rebirth; Philip decides to become a collaborator with the Japanese in order to keep his own British family alive and to secretly assist the local Malayan resistance and save civilian lives by sending along information regarding the purges conducted by the Japanese secret police. Although Endo-san admonishes Philip in grand and tragic terms to remember their love “even when [they] appear to be fighting to the death” as mortal enemies on two opposing sides of the war (218), within the context of contemporary Malaysian literary representations of the Japanese invasion, Philip’s love for Endo-san also inverts the dominant perception in Malaysia and Singapore of the Japanese as militaristic sadists during World War II. While this does not excuse the violence and atrocities committed by the Japanese military, *The Gift of Rain* may be considered part of a category of works about the Japanese occupation that shows “a more human face of the Japanese” who arrived after the initial military attack “to form a civilian government, take over the running of businesses, and staff Japanese-language schools” (Klein 156).

At the same time, Philip’s hybridity and queerness suggests that *The Gift of Rain* may be read as a literary intervention into Malaysia’s cultural nationalism from a queer diasporic perspective. As Gayatri Gopinath argues, “queer incursions into diasporic public culture reterritorialize the home by transforming it into a site where non-heteronormative desires and practices are articulated and performed,” and “rather than doing away with home and its fictions of (sexual, racial, communal) purity and belonging, queer diasporic literature engages in a radical reworking of multiple home spaces. The queer diasporic body is the medium through which home is remapped and its various narratives are displaced, uprooted, and infused with alternative forms of desire” (164, 165). Philip embodies the multiethnic and polyglot admixture of peoples and cultures that makes up colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. When Philip and his siblings were growing up, his father “instructed that [they] were to be addressed in the dialect of Hokkien by the Chinese servants, and Malay by the Malay gardener. Like many of the Europeans who considered Malaya their home, he had also insisted that all his children receive their education locally as much as possible,” such that Philip and his siblings “grew up speaking the local languages,” an education that “would bind [them] to Penang forever” (27). These emotional and linguistic bonds with Penang run deeper than Philip’s biracial heritage, as he avers: “This is my home. Even though half of me is English I have never hungered for England. [. . . ] I have lived on this island all my life, and I know I want to die here too” (19). The fervent and passionate tone of Philip’s declaration may seem oddly
sentimental unless we regard him as a figure who can serve as a way of imagining a balanced relationship between the different and conflicting social and cultural elements that make up Malaysia, a role Philip feels has been given to him through his time and training with Endo-san: “in strengthening my body Endo-san was also, as he had promised, fortifying my mind. It was a process that offered me the ability to bridge the conflicting elements of my life and to create a balance” (181). Philip’s hybridity, queerness, and posed ethnicity challenges the essentialist understanding of race and culture in postcolonial Malaysia that undergirds the state’s official bumiputera policy and reconceptualizes the idea of ethnicity as a posture and a process that can reach across different cultures rather than reinforcing the boundaries between them. The ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, like their counterparts in the United States of America, are often regarded as a minority community that occupies a superior economic niche but that is circumscribed politically and culturally. In the context of Asian American literature and cultural representation, Lisa Lowe argues for an understanding of Asian American cultural practices as hybrid, one that “does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination”; the history that Lowe speaks of is also “multiply determined by the contradictions of capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations” (67). Philip Hutton is a narrator and protagonist whose life is marked by such contradictions, and he, unlike his friends and family members, survives by virtue of his multiple determination by various histories of migration, diasporic contact and liminality, British colonialism, and Japanese imperialism. Philip’s half-British, half-Chinese parentage prevents him from being “completely accepted by either the Chinese or the English” (Tan 28), but the skills he learns from Endo-san, his polyglot fluency, and his collaboration with the Japanese, which leads to both his lionization and his vilification after the war, point to his ability to survive within relationships of unequal power and domination. Through Philip, Tan illustrates how the demographic and cultural makeup of Malaysia has always been heterogeneous and hybrid. Tan’s critique of Malaysia’s state-sponsored national identity works through the same logic of unbalancing and redirecting the anthropological exotic, only this time it is the cultural essentialism underlying the racialized stratification of Malaysian society that is thrown and turned against itself as Tan reterritorializes the idea of Malaysia as home and nation through the queer and hybrid Philip Hutton, expressing a critical nationality through an alternative form of desire and reproduction that is not predicated on the maintenance of ethnic purity and authenticity.

This critical nationality is illustrated through Philip’s key role in restoring old historical buildings in Penang, and his donation of his father’s collection
of ceremonial Malay daggers along with Endo-san’s and his own Japanese swords to the Penang Historical Society. While walking around Penang, the young Philip finds it remarkable that he lives in “a Malayan country ruled by the British, with strong Chinese, Indian, and Siamese influences,” and that he “could move from world to world merely by crossing a street. […] One could easily lose one’s identity and acquire another just by going for a stroll” (Tan 66). After the war, Philip notices many old buildings in the city that were “abandoned by their owners” and “bought by companies that tore them down to build modern shops,” and is filled with a keen “sense of loss”; thus, the adult Philip uses the wealth from his father’s company to set up “the Hutton Heritage Trust” and “saved countless buildings from disappearing, from the shop-houses of Georgetown to the mansions along Northern Road,” with a special emphasis on “using craftsmen from China and England” with “materials as close to the originals as I could” (169). In undertaking this important role in preserving and reproducing the urban space and architecture of Malaysia’s multicultural heritage and history, Philip exercises the economic power of his combined British and Chinese heritage to neither threaten nor criticize the interests of the dominant Malay community, but rather to preserve for society at large the shared and diverse heritage of Malaysia’s past. What is significant here is that Philip’s sense of belonging to Penang and Malaysia is based on cultural practice rather than cultural essence: in his youth he experiences the multiple communities by strolling around the city and adopting identities, and as an elderly philanthropist he commemorates the past by restoring old houses rather than dwelling in his own memories. In this way, the novel challenges the fear of Chinese economic dominance that is one of the principal factors behind the national policy of bumiputera privilege for the ethnic Malay community. The city spaces Philip restores are not simply a recreation of British colonial Malaya, nor are they—like the “modern shops” that spring up after the war—signifiers of a modernity centered on economic progress and development; they are a reminder that Penang, like many other cities in postcolonial Malaysia, is made up of different ethnic cultures and enclaves that can be inhabited and crossed over by those who live there. Philip’s painstaking restoration of these historical buildings can thus be read as a challenge to both the British colonial and the postcolonial Malaysian state’s segregation of city and society according to ethnicity and economic roles. Tan’s representation of Philip offers an implicit critique of the logic of cultural essentialism that underlies this doctrine of official nationalism: if one were to follow this logic, which is itself a legacy of British colonialism that conflates one’s culture with one’s economic acumen, then the imbalance between the different communities in Malaysia will be unresolved, since Malays are always in a state of decline vis-à-vis the Chinese and the Indians, who are in turn naturally
more enterprising and industrious as a result of their immigrant background. If we recall Ronald D. Klein’s observation that the literature about the Japanese occupation serves as way of thinking through “the tactics of survival” and as a means of “forging a [post–World War II] identity” (179), then Tan’s novel goes one step further by unbalancing the status quo of racial hierarchy and cultural essentialism in the national identity of present-day Malaysia.

Furthermore, at the end of the novel Philip is honored by the Penang Historical Society not only for his role in preserving the city’s architectural heritage but also for his generous donation of two sets of weapons: the first is his father’s collection of Malay keris, or ceremonial daggers; the second is a pair of Japanese katana, or samurai swords, that belonged to Endo-san and himself, respectively. The Malay keris is an important “cultural talisman” that “is used in a symbolic and ritualistic way, thus assuring the wearer of proper status as a Malay” (Frey 2). In addition to being a symbolic confirmation of the wearer’s Malayness, the keris is also an important weapon wielded by the legendary hero Hang Tuah, whose exploits are recorded in the “national epic” known as the Hikayat Hang Tuah, and who stands in the “Malay community” as “a symbol of their power and glory as a people” (Piah et al. 232–33). When Philip’s father bought his last keris from a Malay sultan who had been recently deposed (possibly by the British colonial authorities), the weapon was desacralized because it was passing into the hands of a British amateur Orientalist: “But because it was being passed to a European, the sultan had assured him that the soul of the keris had been removed by a bomoh, a Malay warlock” (Tan 161). By returning this keris and others in his father’s collection to the Penang Historical Society, Philip takes these artifacts out of a private Orientalist collection and restores them as important symbols of Malay ethnic and cultural heritage into the public sphere of Penang’s history; however, his actions invert the exclusive and essentialist connotations of the keris with Malay cultural pride and supremacy, because it is not the epic Malay hero Hang Tuah but a hybrid and queer traitor-hero existing inside and outside of the nation’s homogeneous empty time who restores the keris into the public time and space of Penang that he has also played a key role in restoring through the Hutton Heritage Foundation. The keris and the katana no longer exist as instruments of violence, warfare, and ethnic and cultural pride; they are no longer part of an instrumental nationality that valorizes one ethnic identity or community over others as the foundation for the nation-state. Instead, they are recognized as objects through which an alternative claim can be made by Philip upon Malaysia as home and nation through his hybridity and queerness, which is borne out by his donation of the keris and katana to the Penang Historical Society and his decision to allow the Histori-
cal Society to announce his “full name”—Philip Arminius Khoo-Hutton—for “the first time” (430). In so doing, Philip fulfills what his grandfather saw in him during his youth: “Accept the fact that you are different, that you are of two worlds. [...] you are used to the duality of life. You have the ability to bring all of life’s disparate elements into a cohesive whole” (234); Philip draws together the various Malayan and Malaysian histories of colonization and conquest, immigration and diasporic existence, into a cohesive but not necessarily harmonious whole.

**Summary:**

**Diasporic Interventions, National Returns**

*Evening Is the Whole Day* and *The Gift of Rain* evince the intertwining of a literary cosmopolitics and a critical national consciousness through a tactical employment of ethnography and historical realism. These characteristics mark their affiliation with and appropriation of literary tropes used by other diasporic or immigrant writers of South Asian or East Asian descent, an important transnational connection that is enabled by and also critical of the field of global literary production and consumption. At the same time, the commodification of anglophone postcolonial literature is, as Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette remind us, an inevitable outcome of this transnational movement of people, capital, and cultures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, bringing with it an increased metropolitan desire for the culturally foreign and the anthropologically exotic. But Samarasan and Tan, drawing on but also extending their South Asian and East Asian counterparts’ endeavors, employ ethnographic tactics that evoke and invert the conventions of the anthropological exotic through the cutting and splicing of official histories with minoritarian narratives and the foregrounding of hybrid subjectivities as opposed to pure, unsullied communities. The friction between their attachment to the national homeland and their consciousness of its limitations and possibilities marks them as diasporic subjects who do not make “a physical return but rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin” (Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s)” 14). In place of a cosmopolitan subjectivity and deterritorialized mobility, these writers trace a cosmopolitical aesthetic grounded in an abiding and a critical attachment to their homeland of Malaysia.