# English in Malaysia: Identity and the Market Place

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## Abstract

The paper examines Malaysian and Singaporean state policies and examples of literary works that directly or indirectly address the position of English to analyse some of the discursive contradictions and tensions undergirding the use of English in their societies. Contention over the role of English, rejected as a colonial threat to national identity – constructed as essentialist Malay monolingualism – has historically and continuously riven state, public and literary policies and discourse in Malaysia. Ee Tiang Hong's early work articulates the dilemma of the Malaysian Anglophone poet whose voice is critiqued as mimicry of "foreign" tongues. Muhammad Haji Salleh emerged as an elite Malay intellectual with his unnuanced disavowal of English use in Malaysia as a dark psychological depredation of the national soul. This total English language rejection, however, is called into question and undermined by his later bilingual practice of dual Malay and English publications of his work and his praise for the two language rivers that compose him as a single poet-subject. English is now viewed as an instrumental language necessary for competing in the global economy. In Singapore, where this instrumentalist language policy remains uncontested, the state has positioned Singlish, the local variation of English that serves as a major expressive marker of Singaporean identity, as a threat to global economic ambitions.

## Keywords

Bahasa Malaysia, English, national identity, mimicry, bilingualism, globalisation

For almost half a century, the role of English as a cultural and communal language in the nation territory called Malaysia has embroiled not only writers, scholars and academics, but also journalists, politicians, parents and students; in fact, almost every component of the citizenry. While I have focused much of

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my research on American cultural productions after I left Malaysia for the United States in 1969, I continue to read and review English-language writing and debates from the Southeast Asian region. This double focus, on Anglophone Malaysian and US national literatures, serving like a pair of bifocal glasses, encourages both short-range and distance vision, and analogously both contemporary and historical perspectives.

When I go to my study shelves and pull out some of the early English literary publications that had come out of the territory known as Malaya/Malaysia (which, prior to 1965, included the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements, including Singapore), among the archival texts I find Ee Tiang Hong's 1960 *I of the Many Faces*, T. Wignesan's 1964 anthology, *Bunga Emas: Contemporary Malaysian Literature*; and the special issue of *Poet* on Singapore and Malaysia, published in September 1966. At the time of these publications, I was a secondary school pupil and later an undergraduate at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. These particular publications operated on me then as a secret sub-text to my university studies of British literature, of works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson and T.S. Eliot. Although Malaysia became an independent state in 1957, as I noted in my memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, English majors did not study Malaysian English language writing until 1966, when Professor Lloyd Fernando taught the first course in Commonwealth literature, and which was also when I began collecting what we may, for want of a better term, call "local" writing. Post-1969, Malaysian English-language "local" writing was officially categorised as not a national literature, the national status being restricted to literature written in Bahasa Malaysia; such Anglophone writing was relegated instead and continues to be so relegated to the segment known as "sectional literature."[2]

While Malaysian English literature, from its inception in the 1930s to 1950s with Straits Settlements writing, may be said to be a matter of concern for only a small literary elite, it has also always been mired in larger, more contentious issues of national identity, communalist agendas, and even threats to national security, and always in direct and indirect fashion, to national education and economic development. Under British colonial rule, English served as the medium of instruction in all national schools. However, as early as the 1950s, the Fenn-Wu Report recommended that schools should be permitted to use the ethnic language of the learners for instruction, as long as the same national curriculum was followed. In 1956, as the country drew closer to independence, the Razak Report, while allowing for different instructional

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[2] Lloyd Fernando discussed this segmentation of Malaysian literature in his 1986 volume *Cultures in Conflict*; "Sectional and National Literatures in a Multi-Cultural Context" (38-149) established an optimism on "critical exchange" for "moving on to a new era of creativity" that has not proven correct. Also see Quayum, "Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium."

languages at the primary level, pushed for the establishment of Bahasa Melayu (as Malay was commonly called then) as the medium of instruction for all national schools, a recommendation that the Mahathir Report also advocated in the 1970s (Awang Had Salleh 25). English-medium schools began to be phased out in earnest in January 1970 in response to the May 13th 1969 riots, the rationale for such swift transformation being to create an integrated national identity based on Bahasa. Although English was technically retained as a language requirement at the tertiary level, by 1982 all national schools had been changed to Malay-medium schools, with English taught only as a "special subject." Despite continuing complaints published in the national English-language papers on the decline in English language standards, the ministerial bureaucracies did little to counter it. In 1996, Crismore et al reported that 77.99% of students and 87.93% of lecturers polled agreed the standard of spoken English had dropped since 1970, and 74.41% of students and 84.22% of lecturers held the same view of written English (329).[3]

By the millennium, however, with the increasingly globally integrated economies demanding fluency in the language of globalised industries, the importance of English in order to compete successfully in the new information technology industries became overwhelmingly evident. One moment for such governmental awakening was Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir's attempt to set up a Malaysian counterpart to California's Silicon Valley and the construction of Cyberjaya, a smart city that was to be part of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), to generate software projects and high-tech initiatives in Malaysia (Associated Press, Sept 14, 2000). The Prime Minister began to speak publicly then about the "urgent need for Malaysians to master the English language," noting for the first time that such mastery did not make a person "less of a nationalist" (*New Straits Times*, Dec. 30, 2000: A16). By 2000, it was generally lamented that the learning of English had deteriorated to alarming proportions; in fact, the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) noted that about 60% of school heads had "a very poor command of English" (*New Straits Times*, Dec. 30, 2000: A16). Following on the Prime Minister's example, other highly placed figures, such as the executive director of the *New Straits Times*, Abdullah Ahmad, spoke about worsening standards impacting negatively "Malaysia's capacity to participate actively in the global economy and international relations" (Stewart xx). These renewed alarms included criticism of weak English skills in Malaysian universities; English in public universities in 2001 was apparently restricted to professional courses lectures, while all other

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[3] What probably augured worst for these declining standards is the strange observation that students more than the lecturers wanted more standard English language teaching; 78.72% of students agreed that those who did not speak standard English should attend classes to learn it against 59.93% of lecturers (330). That is, the study showed that the teachers themselves were less motivated to uphold English language standards than their pupils.

courses were taught in Bahasa Malaysia; and undergraduates were required to complete only 8 credit hours of English, and only if their SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) results warranted it (Chok Suat Ling 14).

This shifting status of English over the last fifty years, as language of instruction and in relationship to both Malay and Chinese, has a close bearing on the status of Malaysian Anglophone literature, for, to understand the slightly illegitimate status of this literature lingering even to the present, one has to set it in the historical context for the neglect and suppression of English in Malaysia. Even between 1957 and 1969, in a post-Independence hiatus of sorts, before language controversies in Malaysia became so explosive as to render the primacy of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language an indicted topic for public debate in the 1970s, there had been little public support for English-language cultural expressions, few forms of publication outlets, fewer awards and very little social recognition. Ee Tiang Hong's first poetry collection, *I of the Many Faces*, self-published in 1960 when he was 27 years old, by a printing press close to his ancestral home in Melaka, was remarkable for being the first single-authored collection of Malaysian poetry in English, aside from Wang Gung-wu's poetry chapbook, *Pulse*.[4] Today, it continues to be remarkable for its representation of what Homi Bhabha has called "colonial mimicry," a cultural mode that does not merely repeat but repeat with a difference; that is, its mingling of the local with the colonial other, an operation beginning with imitation and concluding with something new, which is not quite white, not quite British poetics.[5]

In fact, arguably, Ee's first collection foregrounds mimicry as its major thematic as well as stylistic element, as suggested in its title. The trope of "many faces," masking, suggesting multiple selves, unstable realities, duplicitous appearances, and ambiguous surfaces, constructs the subjectivity imagined in the title poem. At the same time, the many faces are reducible to one persona, a character, not quite authorial, not always narrator, who is constituted as local, territorially located, and socially, politically and culturally implicated, self-accused of sins, crimes, weaknesses and inadequacies in the poems' stream of interior consciousness and self-reflexive pronouncements. In the opening poem, "I of the Three Monkeys," the speaker deploys the popular Chinese image of the three monkeys (the first with hands over ears, second with hands over eyes, and third with hands over mouth) to suggest inauthentic political

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[4] Ee Tiang Hong, despite his immigration to Perth, Australia, in 1972, remains a noted diasporic Malaysian poet, perhaps because he continued writing out of his quarrels with Malaysian identity politics even in his later books, which includes *I of the Many Faces* (1960), *Myths for a wilderness* (1976), <u>*Tranquerah*</u> (1986) and *Nearing a Horizon* (1986).

[5] Homi Bhabha's theory on colonial mimicry foregrounds 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86) in the works by colonised subjects.

action in the character of the civil servant, who, ignoring public ills, serves instead as "a puppet/ Of a government/ Not of the people" (1). The collection's last poem, "Dead End," announces the poet-persona's decision to abandon the kind of poetry that is only "singing well/ Some mimicry of foreign birds" (24). This maturing perspective ("No more for me… Golden wings of schoolboy crushes" 24) is balanced precariously between two silences – the civil servant's cowardly muteness and cessation of mimicking British poetics – and gives rise to the recognition of the Malaysian English-language poet's dilemma at the moment of decolonisation:

> And yet for all the mining pools
> The latex flowing all year long,
> What power can drive Malaya's pulse
> Or tap a rhythm for its song? (24)

In the context of successful economic drives – figured as material, organic and fluid – emotional and aesthetic development (pulse/heartbeat) is viewed as uncertain, even irrelevant. The concluding question suggests not mere indecisiveness but despair: the incongruous conjunction of "song" with mining pools and flowing latex, the title announces, is already its own defeatist answer.

Some of the poems in *I of the Many Faces* were composed when Ee was an undergraduate at the University of Malaya, at that time established in the Crown Colony of Singapore. The University of Malaya did not separate into two institutions, the University of Singapore remaining in Singapore and the University of Malaya moving to Kuala Lumpur, until 1960, the year the collection appeared. Ee participated as a university student in the discourse around Independence and observed the increasing contentiousness over what should constitute a national culture. His poems come out of the identity debates that were formative to the invention and political shaping of both a new Malaysian and a new Singaporean national identity. R.B. LePage noted in his 1964 seminal study, *The National Language Question: Linguistic Problems in Newly Independent States*, that although political and economic questions are basic to post-Second World War new nation-states, it is "the cultural questions that are the most fundamental" (1). According to LePage, a major cultural question facing linguists – what language to speak and what languages to teach – "was bedeviled from the outset" (2) by problems that we today would describe as ideological. In his examination of the situation in Malaya immediately after it achieved independence in 1957, LePage noted that Malaya was embarked on an education policy "with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country, whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the languages and culture of peoples other than Malays living in the country" (68-69). After 1969, Malaysia indeed moved rapidly toward implementing the first

option mapped by LePage: "To use one… indigenous language for all purposes" (78). In this policy, English as an international language, frequently conflated with English as the colonial language, was downgraded in Malaysian education and civil service. Ee, a Peranakan native speaker of Malay, grew sceptical of the national government that replaced colonial administration and particularly of his function as a civil servant in implementing its national education policies. The dead end the concluding poem gestures toward is multiple. In the poem, decolonising his poetical practice ("No more the days I would compel/ My heart to make up words,/ Waste all my time at singing well/ Some mimicry of foreign birds" 24) does not signify the Malayan English-language poet is liberated into a new consciousness. Malaya's economic progress powers ahead; but with the abandonment of mimicry – those literary practices drawn from British literature – the English-language poet is left with no self-engendered, self-engendering song. Decolonisation, which frees economic energies and leads to material progress, a welcomed development, paradoxically also threatens a cultural dead end for the English-language poet who is suspended outside this economic power; for English, being a colonial language, is to be cleansed from the new nation state.

Muhammad Haji Salleh, trained in English literature at the University of Singapore, was a major public intellectual in formulating the attack on English as a colonising instrument in the "history of intellectual subjugation" (6).[6] Almost fifty years after Malaysia became an independent state, in an article published in 2001, he argued,

> For many native writers the languages and cultures of these colonial powers, be they English, French, Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese, were to lie heavily over their consciousness and conscience, creating a situation where they were condemned to living lives partly dependent for their vocabularies and logic on the colonial cultures. Many were divided souls, and this division has become a problem forever to disturb them, to be continually examined, suffered, argued for and against, and often poured into the dark decades of uncertainty. The literary works that they have come to write are saturated with it. And in many instances darkly feeding on it. It has in the meantime become a problem for the independent country itself. (Muhammad, "Unwriting with the Voice" 6)

The linguist Alistair Pennycook explains in his 1994 volume that some of this resistance to English in Malaysia is ideologically motivated, with English identified as worldly and secular and thus antipathetic to Islamic spiritual values

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[6] Muhammad Haji Salleh, author of nine books of poems, is arguably the most canonised of contemporary Malaysian writers. In 1991 he received the Anugerah Sasterawan Negara, the prestigious National Award, for his contribution to Malay Literature.

(204-8), and he quotes Mohammad Shafi, a Malay nationalist: "'in the Muslim countries there is a great disparity between the objectives of teaching English and the ultimate aim of Muslim education'" [1983] (207). If the soul of the race is non-secular and Islamic, a worldly language like English with its secular temper may be viewed with suspicion and resisted for its irreligiosity. The solution to the problem of eternally dark, dependent and divided souls, according to Malay intellectuals such as Muhammad, is to stop writing in the colonial language and to write only in the "mother tongue," which corresponds to the language of national identity. Yet, Muhammad complains, almost half a century after independence "we still see many Malaysians – Chinese, Indians, and Malays – still [sic] not able to speak good Malay and forever finding strategies for English to be reinstated" ("Unwriting with the Voice" 11). In contrast to Ee's lamentation of the Malaysian English-language poet being at a dead end, Muhammad celebrates the triumph of Malay language poetry in its resistance against the colonised condition of the divided soul:

> This mother tongue… reclaimed from a history of defeat [that must] be restored to its full (often enough oral) power, recreated from memory, from the village and literary imagination. For its magic and, no doubt, difference. It was relished for its otherness, for its distance away from the colonial discourse, for the statement it made in nationalistic terms and its bestowal of identity. ("Unwriting with the Voice" 12)

Muhammad's argument, that the mother tongue is inherently anti-colonial, nationalistic and the rightful maternal progenitor of identity, everything that English, as the colonial interloper, cannot be or do, is teleological and polemically driven. Concerned with identity or soul making, in this passage Muhammad imagines a Malay mother tongue that is essentially ahistorical, an ever-fixed star by which citizens are nurtured into authentic identity.

At the same time, we must note Muhammad's contradictions. In *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (2000), his English-language poetry collection, he republishes not only his original English poems, which first appeared in *Time and its People* (1978), but also translations of selected works from his eight Malay books, spanning his oeuvre from 1973 to 1998. Here and in a recent essay (*Manoa*, 2006), he articulates not a severe rejection of English but a parsing of the differentiated attributes of both Malay and English for the poet who uses both for poetic utterance, that is, the position of a bilingual poet who appropriates both Malay and English for expressive purposes. Muhammad now admits, "I wrote, and still write, in two languages. To be admitted into English and comparative literatures, I needed an international language" (49). Instead of the dark divided souls he had once attacked, he now says, "I owe my poetic inspiration to both languages" (49) and speaks for a bilingual fluency that he had earlier denied: "However, a poet writing in two languages is still a single

poet. He has two rivers flowing within him" (50). At the same time, he privileges Malay as "a musical language in which the meaning is traditionally spun by metaphors and alliteration. The great play of poetry is in the timbre of the sounds and the subtle meaning they evoke. In comparison, English is more direct and practical, but lends itself to so many styles and experiments" (50).

This comparison suggests a racialised linguistics that endows intrinsic poetic qualities (musicality, metaphoricity, subtlety) on Malay and characteristics of modernism (practicality, receptiveness to multiplicity and experimentation) on English. Rajeev Patke picks up on Muhammad's (then monolingual-based) stylistic notions articulating a racialised dimension for Malay-language poetry and generalises broad thematic types for raced-identified Malaysian poets:

> The Malay self expresses identity through community, in a lyric tone which falls back on symbols like earth and blood, to affirm a bond with tradition and continuity, in a voice of lyric simplicity. The Chinese poet speaks ironically and bitterly of dereliction, suffocation and repression. He is not unaware of the depredations of urbanism, but his attachment to place is a more sober, even sombre one, wary of any naive or simple affirmation. ("The Poet in Malaysia")[7]

In counter-distinction to Muhammad's early and still persistent inscription of the polarities of colonial language versus mother tongue, however, linguists such as Charles Ferguson hold that "the whole mystique of native speaker and mother tongue should probably be quietly dropped from the linguists' set of professional myths about language" (ctd. Kachru, Foreword xiii). For Ferguson, "The phenomena of language acquisition, language convergence over time, and language shift are at the very heart of linguistics, offering valuable evidence on the learnability of natural languages by humans and the nature of linguistic change" (Kachru, Foreword xiv). Muhammad's rhetoric, using the problematic logic of symmetry or identity between biological descent and linguistic identity, conflates an essentialist race identity with national identity, and it as a rhetorical move also erases the biological descent presence of other ethnicities and their mother tongues in Malaysia. Today, arguably, as seen in the evolving status of English debated by Malay leaders and intellectuals, this kind of fixed biological descent logic, together with the erasure of similar logic for other communities, contained in the rubric of mother-tongue nationalism, is collapsing under the

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[7] Patke notes also the earlier poet Ee's critique of Muhammad's exclusionary Malay nationalist stylistics: "The nationalist perspective extols a past that extends beyond existing political boundaries, and predates the intrusion of the Western powers and the migrant groups who came in their wake. The singular conception integrates legend and fact in a format consistent with the tradition of early Malay writing…. Muhammad's… definition of national identity… is exclusive" (ctd. in Patke).

pressure of a different logic – the logic of late twentieth-century capital, operating though globalisation forces that reward novelty, multiplicity, flexibility, mastery of global communication technologies and English language ability in Malaysia as everywhere else.

To summarise my argument so far, in 1960, Ee's poem "Dead End" appeared to accurately predict the hopeless future for English language as an expressive medium in Malaysia where government awards, media and education, and other state activities were beginning to adopt the ideological position so eloquently championed by Muhammad. The tin mines and rubber plantations were viewed as non-language-based industries, their flow taking place outside of language. In similar fashion, Muhammad declared in a 1991 article-manifesto, "The Writer as Asian," "in Malaysia, there's no future in English writing. You just can't publish in this language anymore" (51). But both Ee's striking image of the Malaysian economy juxtaposed as a vital phenomenon separate from the fate of a moribund English-based creativity and Muhammad's triumphant dismissal of Malaysian Anglophone writing are not shared by most Malaysians today, this despite the increasing loss of English fluency in a majority segment of the population. Ironically, the social and private disuse of English in Malaysia has been occurring simultaneously as the economic and cultural importance of the language is being signified again publicly in the nation and on the world stage. In 1995, in interrogating the "false binaries" such as those constructed between nationalistic monolingualism and multicultural multilingualism, I observed,

> 'Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa,' language is the soul of the nation, which since the Seventies has been interpreted in Malaysia as the hegemonic position of the Malay language, is now inevitably undergoing some enlargement. The soul of the nation, alas, must also work for its living; more and more, that work is transnational, even transcultural, with English as the global lingua franca. (348)

I wish to revisit this critique with the aim of rethinking what it means for Malaysian cultural workers to be working in the English language in the market place and in the sphere of emotional expressivity.

The dictates of a globalised market place are usually manifested in material ways, and the consequences of these when linked to a monolingual cultural policy are arguably visible and directly correlational. For almost fifty years, Malaysia, to my mind, has operated on a confused, murky, unstable and contradictory language policy, one that falls between LePage's two categories: category one – to use one indigenous language for all purposes, the policy which after 1969 was adopted by the Malaysian state, to privilege Bahasa Malaysia and to downgrade the teaching of English to a "special subject"; and category two: to give status to Bahasa Malaysia and also to English, a bilingual

practice which has served as the de facto, informal, language policy practiced in non-governmental segments of the economy, including multinational corporations, and in private educational institutions, among non-Malay citizens and Malay elites. In fact, according to Pennycook's 1994 study, Bahasa Malaysia was then used by about 70 per cent of the time in government, but English predominantly in the private sector (211), a gap in language usage that in 2006 may be said to be even larger.

The consequences, however, of the state's downshifting of English have been negative for Malaysia's economy, now removed from primary dependence on mining and rubber plantations (although still heavily dependent on oil and palm oil production). In September 2002, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that "According to Malaysian government statistics, about one-third of the students who graduated from the country's 14 public universities in the last year remain unemployed. Nearly 90% of the jobless are Malays with degrees in religious studies or social sciences and no English proficiency" (Marshall, A15).[8]

The report quoted Chandra Muzaffar, president of a social issues group called the International Movement for a Just World, "When it comes to contemporary knowledge and information – whether it's new agricultural techniques or an environmental report – civil servants and those in the private sector are not able to digest these things…. It's a huge disadvantage" (A15). Prime Minister Mahathir, the major crafter of Malaysia as it is today, said at the 2001 UMNO convention, "Ninety-nine percent of the information we need comes from foreigners in English…. Information in this information age does not come from Malays" (qtd. in A15), a dilemma that LePage had anticipated in 1964, when he wrote of the consequences facing an indigenous monolingual policy: "economic advance is likely to be retarded…. The country may become isolated, politically and culturally, from the international scene" (78).

That Malaysia has not become isolated and economic retardation remains still a threat rather than a fact is partly due to the formal and informal language policies that parallel the monolingual education system in national schools and universities, for the state has also permitted the development of bilingual schools using Chinese and Tamil, while many parents who can afford it have taken private steps to ensure successful English-language learning for their children. On a socio-cultural level, however, the contradictions in language policies have bred cynicism and confusion concerning the state's position on the relation between English and the national language, negative public sentiments that augur deeper social ills. Pennycook summarised some of these contradictions when he noted:

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[8] The present figure for unemployed public university graduates, that is, students educated chiefly through the medium of the national language, is 70%. See Gurvinder Singh and Sharan Singh.

> The Malays, furthermore, have felt the need to discourage English amongst non-Malays and promote the national language, and at the same time to provide the opportunities for a Malay elite to be fluent in English. Thus, as Mead (1988) suggests, on the one hand 'the national elite – and in particular the Malay elite – must be encouraged to include English in their arsenal of languages', but on the other hand 'the masses – and in particular the non-Malay masses – must be directed away from English culture and towards the goal of a Malay-speaking polity'. (203)

In Malaysia, as in many other territories, an ideological gulf separates critics like Muhammad, who view English as predatory equally on regional languages like Bahasa Malaysia and on language giants like Chinese, an image of English which we may term Super English, and defenders or promulgators of English as the solution-bearing, unifying language for a world already globalised if not yet in political unity, a theoretical and linguistic approach to the language that many now call Global English. Somewhere between these malignant and benign visions lies the theoretical construction of English as World Englishes, nativised, locally constituted, improvisational, flexible, adaptable, creative and expressive.[9] Ee's poetry suggests that this concept of English as local, coming from particular locales and linguistic communities, must ignite the imagination of the Malaysian English-language writer who rejects "foreign mimicry" and the submission to exogamous standards and vocabulary; and it is this very emergent multiplicitous creativity that I have argued elsewhere that may be seen to be threatened, not only by monolingual mother-tongue ideologies, but also by the march of Super English into the twentieth first century.

Like Ee's poems, Muhammad's anti-colonial criticism of English belongs to an earlier part of the twentieth century when English could still be thought of as one of a number of international languages, which was how LePage conceived it to be. It is one matter to plan a heroic resistance against a colonial interloper; it is another altogether to plot resistance to a language whose presence is dominant in the global economy and whose absence in a nation state is a warrant of its economic failure. Of course, English is not the only international language: Chinese is read and spoken by more people in the world; Spanish can boast of millions of speakers across multiple territories; and French and German have not wholly lost their reach even after the empires that spread

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[9] Braj Kachru's work on World Englishes has served as the major theorisation on this phenomenon. His paradigm sets up an inner circle of "native" speakers using a recognised established standard of English (Britain, the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand), a second "outer circle" of World Englishes that has evolved historically through colonial and trade contacts to indigenised forms (India, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, for example), and an "expanding circle" that is just beginning to use English as an international language with little indigenous input into its forms (China, Japan, Korea, for instance). This paradigm recognises the legitimacy of diverse formations of Englishes, while not privileging the inner circle as offering the sole acceptable form.

their use have been dismantled. But English is the only language of globalisation, accompanying, mediating and shaping those global flows – of capital and finance, information, culture, people – that form our contemporary realities.[10] The terms for the debate on the role and functions of English have changed drastically from when Ee self-mockingly posed his literary ambition as "mimicry of foreign birds." Today, many more millions than during the height of the British Empire study English-language tapes from the American mid-West in order to have an opportunity to participate in the global flows of media, information and capital that now compose the market for the world.[11]

Between the ideological views that construct Super English as dangerous and Global English as instrumental, useful, valuable and, above all, seemingly inevitable, all individual private positions, not merely those of poets, possess public significance. Whether we choose to speak English or another language to our infants, to insist on speaking a native language even to a non-comprehending tourist, to purchase products with no English-language information attached, and so forth: each private individual moment adds to the decisive processes by which English continues to escalate in its scale as the language of globalization or to lose its grip and erode in its territorial purchase. This significance of individual choice is further magnified when it moves from merely private to a public and visible domain, the domain of language of expression and production occupied by public intellectuals, politicians, academics, artists, poets and writers.

A study of the actual language choices made by Muhammad – despite his overt criticism of colonised English-speaking Malaysians – suggests an ironic subversion of his defense of Malay as the only legitimate language for national expression. Beginning with his first collection of poems, written in English, *Time and Its People*, in 1971, Muhammad has published at least another six

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[10] See Arjun Appadurai for a succinct mapping to "flows" leading to various "scapes" (mediascapes, ethnoscapes, etc) that may be said to form the global imaginary in its swiftly changing, provisional, integrative, coercive, dynamics.

[11] Debates on the proper role of English in national development and for social and cultural uses continue to roil political discourse in Japan, Korea and China as well as in European countries and elsewhere. In 2001, it was reported that in Korea "Children between the age of four and six are taught basic reading, writing, grammar and conversation by native English speakers" (*Straits Times* January 13, 2001: A11). In 2000, when the President Kim Dae Jung was asked if English "might become an official language of Korea," he hedged his bets, to say that "we will very seriously review the possibility" (Kirk 6); and in the same year, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan proposed in a report on Japan's goals for the 21st century the proposal "to make English the official second language," in response to criticism that called Japan "a failed state for its low English proficiency," and to the threat of falling further behind "in technology, finance and information unless more Japanese learn to speak the language" (Tolbert 1). In 2000, also, the teaching of English to students as young as seven in Thalwil, Switzerland, was attacked, setting off "a movement for a constitutional amendment that would block the canton of Zurich from expanding its new English program to all of its schools by 2003" (Daley xx).

collections and edited collections of poetry and criticism in English. Many of these volumes are translations of Malay works, demonstrating that for the radical mother-tongue defender, English not only poses no danger when it performs in translation, but must be seen to be a positive good, else why these volumes? Mother-tongue use is for national identity, English for circulation in the international sphere. Moreover, as translator of his own and others' Malay-language poetry, Muhammad appears incurious as to how his mastery of English has or has not left his consciousness unclouded. Examining Muhammad's language practices, one may conclude that mastery of English is no evil; one may go as far as to say that it is the capital that permits this particular practitioner the resources to succeed in an international academic domain, for example, as Visiting Chair of Malay Studies at Leiden University. Is English use evil only when it is taken as the means toward individual creative expressiveness? Muhammad's seeming contradictory positions suggest that English as the language of translation takes the position of the secondary language, serving as mediator between mother tongue text and foreign audience[12] and so implicitly assumes that the act of translation does not signify creative choices and original expressivity.

In many ways the response to the place of English in Malaysia has come three-quarter-circle back to the controversies in my youth when many nationalists decided that this language from a little island fronting the cold Atlantic Ocean was not merely a historical dead end but an active threat to nation building and an affront to pride in the national language. The current negotiational complexity underlines how English continues to serve as a holding place in Malaysian socio-political discourse for ambivalent, multivalent quarrels, many of which have little to do with the language itself. As Pennycook puts it,

> an English teacher in Malaysia… is confronted by the position of English relative to the cultural politics of Malay ascendancy, Bumiputraism, Islamization, the Chinese hold on the economy, different models of development, differential distribution of power and wealth by class and ethnicity, Malaysia's position within a shifting global economy, Islamic opposition to secular knowledge and Western culture and so on. (257)

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[12] Muhammad's ambivalence is more clearly enunciated in his very different position on bilingual poetics on the occasion of the English-language publication of *Rowing Down Two Rivers*; the blurb that accompanies the collection and which is republished as part of an essay in *Manoa*, 2006, reads: "A poet writing in two languages is still a single poet. However, he has two rivers flowing within him. If he feels that he should take out a boat and row down one of them, the poems may be in Malay but if he chooses the other, then it would be in English. The person is the same and so are the experiences and the cumulative life." In this construction of the poet as "writing in two languages," expressions of experiences and "cumulative life" written in English are held to be inviolably the same as poems written in the mother tongue, and there is no allusion to the dark destructive forces of English-use on the souls of Malay poets.

To give an example of such conflations, back home visiting my family in August 2002, I was not so surprised to read the front pages of the Malaysian English-language newspapers, which carried daily debates over the government's recent decision to have Math and Science subjects taught in English. These debates, however, did not repeat those I had read over thirty years ago. There was no mention of English as a colonial language whose dominance would have to be overthrown for the survival of the national and racial soul. Instead, the emphasis now was almost wholly on English as an instrumental language, whose mastery, as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said in a speech to the Federation of Hokkien Associations convention in August 2002, "would enable the people to gain knowledge in science and technology" (*The Star* August 2, 2002: 2). Such rhetoric was aimed at calming the fears not of Malay-language ideologues but of Chinese-language ideologues who feared the compulsory instatement of English as the language of instruction for Math and Science would weaken the very successful programmes that formed the jewels in the crown of top-rated Chinese-language schools. Indeed, rather than viewing English as the road block to national unity, as was argued in the sixties and seventies when the status of the national language appeared to be tenuous, the minister now described this language tool for technological advancement, English, as also a means for forging "national integration and unity through education" (2). The news report on his speech was titled "Use of English to ensure equality," yet it was never clarified who here was unequal (was it Chinese schools and Chinese Malaysians who were unequal, and was this inequality inferiority or superiority, and to whom?) or what the root causes of such inequality might be. Would the use of English instead of Chinese to teach Math and Science make such teaching equal to that in national schools, whereas such Chinese-language teaching had hitherto resulted in superior performance for Chinese-language schools? The ironic twist in this development was that by 2002 the Malaysian state had to persuade non-Malays as well as Malays of the value of English in nation-formation, when thirty years ago the state's position was to persuade the same communities as to the threat of English to the formation of a nation united under one national language, Bahasa Malaysia.[13]

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[13] In July 2002, Prime Minister Mahathir announced that from the first grade on, all math and science classes would be taught in English, a policy disliked and criticised by both Malay language proponents AND Malaysian Chinese educators who were successfully educating their students in these subjects using Chinese. The ironic language situation from 2001 onwards was that resistance to re-implementing English even in a limited manner as the language of instruction for math and science came more from the Chinese than Malay communities. English now was no longer viewed as the language bar against Malay academic and economic success; instead the government presented it as the language that would "ensure equality" among the groups. The mother tongue policies, it was argued, had not only diminished English standards but had resulted in de facto segregation and loss of tolerance. In 2004, for example, according to Prime Minister Badawi, only

Another response to these fears is suggested in a Chinese Malaysian academic's note that even in China, the Ministry of Education in 2001 had "directed all primary schools to start teaching English to third grade pupils" and in Shanghai, "pupils will learn English from the first grade" (Tan 11). Such comparative analyses suggest the transformation of constructions of English, originally detested as an instrument of colonial oppression threatening the newly independent nation state, and now desired as global capital, whose possession strengthens the nation's competitive power. All this debate, of course, was already anticipated decades earlier, when scholars such as LePage and Kachru theorised the phenomenon of international and World Englishes, predicting the global reach of local varieties of English disarticulated from its problematic history as a colonial language originating in Britain. A contemporary scholar, Anne Pakir, has further developed these foundational concepts in her notion of "Glocal Englishes" for English "that is global and yet rooted in the local contexts of its new users." Pakir has argued for a culturalist understanding of language taking into account its capacity for "the integrative, the interpersonal, the heuristic and the aesthetic," and her re-ordering of Kachru's model of the outer circle of English is helpful in clarifying the Singapore situation: "The range and depth of English knowing bilingualism in ascendant English knowing bilingual communities produce a new commodity, a new language of identity, of self-reflexive social acts" (81).

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about two per cent of Chinese students attended national schools, viewed by the government as "the main catalyst for the integration process in the young generation" [1]. Four years after the government's reinstatement of English as language of instruction for math and science, in 2006 the notion that English must serve as an important instructional language at all levels, from primary to tertiary, specifically in the sciences, became conventional wisdom (see *New Sunday Times* January 2006; *New Straits Times* March 26 2006; Ahmad 24), even as a quarter (26.2%) of students taking the national exams (PMR) failed English (*The Star* 23 December 2005). Prime Minister Badawi, speaking at a pre-Budget 2005 consultation at the Finance Ministry, cited as an example that to be active and effective in negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it was not enough just to be knowledgeable about its rules and regulations but more important to have the strength in negotiation and this required competency in the English language: "Dramatic efforts must be made to convey the message effectively to all Malaysians that it is in the national interest to enhance the country's international competitiveness in the era of globalization and information and communications technology for Malaysians to master the English language."

The view that the government's past English language policy has been a failure is also now standard fare. See Lim Kit Siang's "Education in Malaysia": "I am really hoping we will soon see the return of English-medium schools. Lest we forget, our country was built by English-educated Malays, Chinese and Indians. When we killed off English-medium education, what did we get? An obvious decline in academic standards…. Malay has not worked out, and has encouraged a rot in our academic standards. Thus, the only other logical language to use is English…. Why don't we use English as a medium of instruction at secondary level? (Please don't quote me as anti-Malay as I honestly do not mean to bring up sensitive issues here but merely for an open discussion). In doing so, our students will definitely be able to master English and fare well in other subjects too, given that there are unlimited sources of knowledge and aids written in English out there."

But in Malaysia, despite the recent attempts to reinstate English into the educational system, it is unlikely that any "ascendant English knowing bilingual communities" will arise in uncontested manner; and the fears of loss of cultural identity, expressed by both Bahasa nationalists and Malaysian Chinese communitarians in 2002, will not easily be vanquished. Identity discourses – or soul rhetoric – while partially subsumed to the language of the global market place, have not been effaced. Nor should they be.

My question moves the site for soul making from mother tongue mystique to the place of World Englishes where our human learnability, never fully restrainable despite all state controls to engineer politically correct language usage, is evidenced in many of the twentieth century's major literary achievements: the English language works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Rohinton Mistry and Anita Desai, for example, all testifying to Kachru's thesis that

> English is used in non-Western societies consistent with local literary norms of creativity and for maintaining local patterns of life. When English is adapted to other cultures – to non-Western and non-English contexts – it is understandably decontextualized from its Englishness (or, for that matter, its Americanness). It acquires new identities. In the interactional networks of its new users, English provides an additional, redefined communicative code. (9)

Where, then, is the place of non-market, non-instrumental, non-technical English in a language policy that privileges only a technical mastery of English? Shall we move from bad colonial English to good technological global English necessary to drive Malaysia's engines in the world economy, but with Ee's notion of the poet's song in English still bracketed as mimicry of foreign birds, and thus still politically and socially irrelevant?

Paradoxically, in the twenty-first century, it is arguably the creative potential of the English language that makes it eminently relevant at both local and global levels. Writers who publish in English, whether as language of use or translation, may have their works circulate in what Arjun Appadurai has called global media flows in a way that many other authors, publishing in their national languages, have scant access to. Even as the language an author uses is an aesthetic medium, the fluid through which her spirit and passions are distilled, it is also a commodity, an artefact to be distributed in the cultural marketplace. English is not merely the language of fashion; it is the fabric of the marketplace itself, the fibre optics through which the creative is communicated. While translations take place increasingly and literary works in other languages may also enjoy access to large audiences, it is instructive that much of this translation is almost always viewed as from other languages into English. For

writers in Malaysia, unless they are contented to write out of a rural locale and to restricted audiences, this English-language structure of world communications, technologies, sciences and information, almost necessarily signifies that they will have to be bilingual and will possess a metropolitan consciousness.

In the last few decades, a number of Malaysian writers, restricted by state disapproval of creative English-language writing and limited support of non-Bumiputras, have done their writing away from Malaysia. Like Ee Tiang Hong, Beth Yahp, Lau Siew Mei and others migrated to Australia; among those who ended in the United States are Hillary Tham, Lawrence Chuah and myself. Many more moved to Singapore, among them Catherine Lim now regarded as Singapore's most famous author, Leong Liew Geok, Aaron Lee and Dave Chua, whose first novel, *Gone Case*, offers a remarkably successful example of Malaysian English, or Manglish, working at the boundaries of expressivity possible only through such nativised English stylistics:

> You know fat Andrew? Liang asks, as he swings his body on the monkey bar.
> Yah, why?
> He already studying for PSLE liao.
> Holidays also study? Xiao.
> Fuck xiao.
> He got tuition teacher right?
> Yah, everyday. Got computer quiz, got mother, got assessment. Kiasu. Kiasu.
> Kiasu. Kiasu. You? Got study or not?
> Don't have lah. Don't even know what the books look like. You?
> A bit.
> Wahleow. Your ma make you?
> Yah.
> OK OK. Means I must also start.
> No need lah.
> See how man.
> He sighs and drops down from the monkey bar. I let go of the old metal too. There are thick spots of paint flakes on my palms.
> Tomorrow they'll be upgrading this playground.
> For what?
> Better things.
> It's OK already. What for?
> You tell them lah
> So last time to play here.
> Yah. So better enjoy it while you can. Things don't last long here, he says.
> Then he becomes quiet as he goes from swing to bar to slide.
>
> (*Gone Case* 19)

This dialogue uses both Standard English, or International English as it is often termed, when it is the narrator speaking. Standard English is also the default register when characters are reporting without personal emotional engagement. However, with intimate, emotional engagement, speakers resort to the elliptical register recognised as Malaysian English which shares many features with Singapore English. (Dave Chua is a Malaysian now viewed as a Singaporean writer, and his dialectical register is as much recognizably Manglish as it is Singlish). Such code shifting marks the local English in which syntax is abbreviated, and conventional English idioms are dropped in favour of certain lexical idiosyncrasies; for example, "What for?" "No need," and the tags, "yah" and "lah." Indigenised English, however, can only be fully discerned through oral markers, which include a range of tones that, like the Hokkien and Malay oral speech from which these features are drawn, possess inflections expressive of distinctively different emotional states. The nature of this nativised English, thus, cannot be wholly grasped by reading with the eye. The ear must provide the tonal and emotional contexts for full comprehension, a linguistic knowledge only available to the insider, and so in/formative of shared identities.

In Singapore, a separate nation state from Malaysia since 1965, its mother-tongue bilingual policy has resulted in English as the prestige language for government, education, business and social cultural interactions. Because of the widespread acceptance of English as the national and local lingua franca, English has taken on specific local forms that are increasingly recognised outside of Singapore. A July 2002 forum, featuring Lydia Kwa, Fiona Cheong, and myself, published by a major women's literary review in the US, *The Women's Review of Books*, focused a great deal on the issue of choice of non-Standard English, both Manglish and Singlish, in our novels. According to Cheong, "I wouldn't call the vernacular used by some of the novel's characters' Singlish; it's a written form of Singlish, and in fact it's an invented written form of Singlish. Because what I wanted to get at was a certain rhythm, the way people talk, which I missed hearing. The way my relatives talk, the sound of their voices" (25). For Kwa, her audience "might be… people who are fascinated by Singlish" (24).

However, as I observed in the forum, "in the United States… readers don't get the musical sound of Singlish or Manglish; they think of it as broken English or bad English. When I do a reading I read this English the way it sounds, and then the audience gets it…. Singaporean and Malaysian readers can hear it, but American readers lose it completely" (*Women's Review of Books* 25). On the one hand, deploying a nativised English affords the writer a valuable strategy to tap into expressive communicative and symbolic resources that contribute to inclusive identity formations. On the other hand, these identity formations tend to exclude those who do not possess fluency in the nativised

variety. This double-edged power of language, to bind and to divide, explains some of the reasoning behind the Singapore Government's active repression of Singlish. For David Crystal, an eminent linguist, language "serves two purposes, intelligence and identity" (Green 15). Commenting on Goh Chok Tong's National Day speech that criticised the use of Singlish, Crystal notes, "He is missing the point that standard English and Singlish have two different functions – intelligence and identity…. People with Singlish are just as fluent as people speaking standard English in Singapore, but they are different. The Prime Minister should be saying that people need to develop their standard English as well, but what he said was a waste of breath because Singlish is already there" (Green 15). More significantly, he observes, "you can bring people together through their use of language – it's part of our identity, and as soon as you start putting conditions on its use you alienate sections of the population from each other" (Green 15).

Which is what appears to be happening in Singapore. A Member of Parliament, Seng Han Thong, declared in one eruption of debates on the use of Singlish, "We need to speak a language in a simple manner that everyone can understand" (*The New Paper* August 21, 2002: 12). "Singlish Breeds Elitism," an article in *The New Paper* charged, because its "selfish" promoters are discouraging English proficiency, an attribute necessary for national economic advancement. This charge is counter-intuitive, particularly as the article also goes on to quote students who note that they switch to Singlish "when we visit hawker centers. Otherwise they'd think we were putting it on" (12-13). Dr. Balakrishnan, Minister of State for National Development, according to the report, "accepted the place Singlish has in our hearts, but debated its place in our future" (12). As in Malaysia, although with a different nuance, the state has clear negative views on English that may possess more than just an instrumental goal. "I'm not going to deny its emotional resonance," the minister was quoted as saying. "But let's get over the hype and claims to emotional pull. Plain English in Singapore is about opening channels of communication and opening more opportunities for people. And, if we can accept that, then there will be more chances to move ahead." Any threat to the universal privileging of English as the international language of the marketplace in Singapore must be defused. Yet at the same time as the minister dismisses emotional resonance as mere hype and pull, he predicts that "as Singapore becomes more internationalized, I expect that even informal forms of the language will become more internationally intelligible" (12). International intelligibility in Singapore continues to be constructed in opposition to emotional intelligibility, the operations of the global marketplace in opposition to the expressive cultural life of the local community. In Singapore, Singlish operates in government discourse in reverse mirror image to global English in Malay intellectual discourse. Both are to be eliminated from social use, Singlish in Singapore

because it interferes with the more perfect operations of international communications and market opportunities; and until recently International English in Malaysia because, as Muhammad's 2001 article argued, it interfered with nation building, identified with Malayness, Islamic identity and traditional rural or village folkways.

There may be no final resolution to such English debates in Malaysia and Singapore inasmuch as identities, cultures and economies are always in process, provisional, and subject to unpredictable forces usually not autonomously containable. But one may look to the very critics of English to discover compromises and evolving relations that suggest ways of moving out of the dead end paradigm of colonial English in a postcolonial world. In Malaysia, the urgent crisis of loss of fluency in English among the masses of national students pushed the Government to reconsider its abandonment of English language literature in the national curriculum. After a series of meetings with university literature faculty, the Education Department created an anthology of English language poems and short stories whose study is mandatory for the Form Four or SPM exams. The anthology, published by Dewan Bahasa, the institution originally established to ensure the dominant position of Bahasa Malaysia in the country, in effect serves as a belated recognition that reducing English to merely an instrumental language, of limited use to a small circle of professionals and devoid of intimate, subjective and expressive attributes, qualities that make a language social rather than technical, has not been a successful pedagogical policy for maintenance of English-language skills, at least not in Malaysia.

An analysis of Muhammad's poem, "si tenggang's homecoming," the second poem in the SPM English literature anthology, coming after the opening selection, William Shakespeare's sonnet, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?," may help illuminate the ambivalent and ambiguous relations between identity, nation and language that characterise much of Malaysia's cultural attitudes. Muhammad's poem must be read intertexually as a Malay Malaysian's answer to Edwin Thumboo's Singaporean poem, "Ulysses by the Merlion." Muhammad's poem imagines a homecoming hero, drawn from a well-known Malay story. In the folktale Si Tenggang has travelled far from his village and returns a rich man, only to reject his mother because he is ashamed of her poverty. The story serves as a cautionary tale that travel alienates son from mother and results in the loss of filial values. "si tenggang's homecoming" is a slippery text, an apologia for the native son who has travelled and now returns to find himself changed, even as the village remains the same. In six stanzas, the speaker, who is both the re-imagined character of the folk tale and a persona speaking for the poet himself, puts forward a complicated argument that presents the returned native as both unchanged in identity, the same as the villagers ("I am just like you/ still malay"; "I am not a new man"), and also a changed self, whose "physical travel" is also "a journey of the soul,/ transport

of the self from a fatherland" (5). Because the soul has journeyed, it has absorbed something of the stranger: "the knowledge that sweats from it/ is a stranger's knowledge" (5). A tense negotiation of accusation and exculpation is played out in the second stanza, which, while it extenuates Si Tenggang's harsh treatment of his mother and grandmother as a response to their "predecisions" or prejudices, repeats the criticism that the hero has "been changed by time and place,/ coarsened by problems/ estranged by absence" (5).

Much of the poem is composed of an idealisation of the hero who has learnt to "choose between/ the changing realities" (5). Indeed, as much as the poem constructs an essentialising notion of Malay identity – to choose and accept only that "which matches the words of my ancestors,/ which returns me to my village/ and its perfection" (6) – it destabilises this construct of a perfect past and roots symbolised by ancestors and village. The returning son has been "broadened by land and languages" (5), "to hold reality in a new logic" (7). He is the Malay who is now "freed from the village,/ its soils and ways/ independent."

The poem makes two contradictory claims of identity, to be both returned to, yet also liberated from a village past, to be both the same and different. The learning gained from exposure to different lands and languages has both deleterious and positive effects on the new Malay. The poem thus takes up the dilemma of soul and market place. Si Tenggang returns with boats loaded with goods to be shared with the villagers: "the contents of these boats are yours too/ because I have returned." In a soul that now sweats "a stranger's knowledge," Muhammad imagines a subject whom "languages" have changed and whose liberation from tradition and the past results not in loss but in a transformed Malay identity: "I am you…. I have found myself." The individual self, taught by "the people and cities/ of coastal ports," is no longer subsumed to traditional Malay identity but indeed becomes a new version of that Malay self, an amalgamation of soul and profitable learning.

Si Tenggang, possessor of languages and learning, subtle, proud, independent, capable of containing contradictions, offers a different vision from that of the dark, divided, dependent souls still using English instead of the mother tongue that Muhammad imagines in the article, written a number of years after the composition of "si tenggang's homecoming." That the poet who speaks for the values of plural languages in negotiating the tensions between "predecided," rural Malay identity and a changeful, progressive and cosmopolitan Malay identity is the same intellectual who appeals to an originary Malay mother tongue and who lambasts English usage in Malaysia tells us perhaps little about the current debates on English in Malaysia. I would argue, however, that we learn much more about the crisis of modernisation on constructions of the Malay soul in this poem than we do in Muhammad's polemical writing. And what his poem tells us is that English in Malaysia has the

creative capacity for profound psychological and emotional communication as well as the instrumental edge for mediating the nation's entry into the competitive global technological economy.


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