Creating a Nation: Peter Nazareth as Literary Critic

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Abstract

Peter Nazareth is a well known literary critic of African and Third World literatures. Using his most recent book, *Edwin Thumboo: Creating a Nation Through Poetry*, this essay analyses Nazareth's critical thinking and identifies three basic components. The first component establishes that Nazareth is a communal critic, indicating the desire not to have one's own voice dominating the discourse. The second component is Nazareth's power of synthesis, which is the driving force behind his discourse. Synthesis generally means combining two different things to create a new thing. Born from *three* cultures, that is, African, Malayan, and Goan, this fragmentation becomes for Nazareth an urge for bridging, which later develops into a high artistic synthesising. The third component is the delight of influence, which constantly feeds synthesis and communal criticism. Not having anxieties about being influenced, Nazareth's power of synthesis celebrates all influences in a complex textual pluralism.

Keywords

Anxiety of influence, delight of influence, communal criticism, fragmentation, synthesis, textual pluralism

> I too am a colonial who had to struggle to break from the western way of writing criticism, which is one of the zones of a power struggle – the struggle to decide who is to interpret one's work and how that work is to be interpreted.
>
> - Peter Nazareth, *Edwin Thumboo: Creating a Nation Through Poetry* (140)

> Critics like Peter Nazareth have influenced my work**.** They write constructive criticism**.**
>
> - Ishmael Reed, *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* (241)

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> And I believe that Edwin Thumboo, and I, have been fortunate travellers to be exposed to a critic like Peter Nazareth, who in this book on Thumboo, continues to stretch and extend the parameters of criticism closer to the spirit of the dust of that Indian soil that has been the source of our origins and inspirations.
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> - Sasenarine Persaud, "Handful of Dust: ET and the Merlion" (12-13)

Professor Peter Nazareth has been teaching at the English Department of the University of Iowa since 1973, and has been an advisor to the International Writing Program (IWP) since 1977. He has been one of the most prolific and versatile Professors in the history of the English Department. To date, Nazareth has authored, in addition to numerous articles, two novels, two radio plays, and seven books of literary criticism primarily on writers from Africa and the "Third" World such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejer, Ishmael Reed, Salman Rushdie, among others.

Edwin Thumboo is a Singaporean poet and widely considered the unofficial poet laureate of his country. Nazareth's book on Thumboo, in addition to being an innovative approach to literary criticism, can be viewed as a real, not symbolic, act of multiculturalism and internationalism. For its poetry is Asian, its literary criticism is saturated with Goan-African and American sensibilities, and very significantly the book was conceived and catalysed in 1977 at the IWP in Iowa City where Nazareth as an advisor of the programme met Thumboo the guest of the programme.

I have been working on this essay since June 2008. When I read the first few pages of Nazareth's book on Thumboo, I was fascinated by the unusual literary criticism Nazareth employs on Thumboo's poetry. After I had finished reading the book, I decided to read the poetry outside Nazareth's influence, which was very hard because Nazareth's critical analysis of Thumboo's poems is so solid that my attempt to read the poems without Nazareth's influence proved to be futile. But during the months of July and August, I was lucky and unlucky at the same time: Unlucky because I could not find anywhere any of the poetry books by Thumboo; I tried the University of Iowa's main library and there was one copy of Thumboo's *Ulysses by the Merlion*, which was not available for check out due to the flood of Iowa. I also tried to buy some of Thumboo's poetry collections from Amazon.com, but could not find any. Towards the end of August, I learned that Iowa City's Public Library has a good and active office of interlibrary loan. Reluctantly and sceptically, I placed a request for interlibrary loan of three major books of poetry by Thumboo as they are listed in the reference section of Nazareth's book: *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), and *The Third Map: New and Selected Poems* (1993). I was lucky I could not get the books immediately, for the delay of two months gave me a chance to somewhat recover, so to speak, from Nazareth's influence. While reading Thumboo's poems, I found that Nazareth's influence was helpful in guiding me though the complexity of Thumboo's poetry. At this point, I thought, it is really important to my understanding and to the readers in general that I write an analysis of Peter Nazareth's innovative method of literary criticism. Initially, I wanted to write a

brief review of the book that focuses primarily on the concept and treatment of language according to both Nazareth and Thumboo. But as I became more involved, especially during my second reading of Nazareth's book, I became interested in not only language, but also the method Nazareth uses in examining poem by poem the majority of Thumboo's poetry. Hence, my plan for this essay is first to examine carefully Nazareth's critical thinking and the structure of his argument. I will begin by giving a description of the structure of the book as a framework or a map for Nazareth's general approach to Thumboo's poetry, then I will move on to discuss the other issues.

Nazareth's book on Thumboo is divided into two major parts: ONE and TWO. Part ONE comprises the criticism and it takes up most of the space, from page 2-153. This section is not divided into chapters; rather it is divided into topical entries such as "Meeting Edwin Thumboo," "Thinking Thumboo," "Making Us See," "Seeing The Political," "Friends And Mentors," "History, Metaphysical History," "The Erotic," "National Consciousness," "Ekphrasis and E-Mail," "Edwin Thumboo As Counter-Ulysses," "Love And Loss," "Singapore Lament," "Returning With Yeats," "Sun, Moon, Power," "Asia," "Seeing Singapore's People," "Missing Power," "Dreaming," "Muse," "The Footnote Man," "Memory, History, Words," and "Spiralling." Part TWO is composed primarily of a long and very detailed interview with Thumboo by Nazareth. The interview was done in 1977; it runs from page 155 to page 223. Then there's "The Afterwords" of 4 pages, which is almost equally divided between Thumboo's poem "National Library 2007" and Nazareth's "Reading the Text/s" which is an explication of two versions of Thumboo's poem, "National Library 2007." Then follows a two-page biographical note titled "About Edwin Thumboo." Then two pages of photos of Nazareth with Thumboo interacting on different occasions. The book ends with "References" that lists all the primary and secondary references used in the book. The structure of the book indicates Nazareth's communal approach to literary criticism. What I mean by communal is the desire not to have one's own voice dominating the argument or the discourse as is usual in most of the books of literary criticism; rather Nazareth seems keen on sharing the discourse with the poet Thumboo, allowing him an ample space to speak his own mind, to agree or object. This communal approach, as this essay will demonstrate, is crucial to Nazareth's literary criticism as it applies to Thumboo's poetry.

Why the Communal? The Psychological and Cultural Backgrounds

Anyone familiar with Peter Nazareth as Professor in classroom, or as a public lecturer or who has read him as a scholar, can easily notice Nazareth's power of synthesis as a driving force behind his discourse. Synthesis in general means combining or putting together two disparate or different things to create a new thing. The new thing could be better, more desirable, or having a higher quality. In philosophy, Hegel's dialectic is based on the particular schema that produces a synthesis. Hegel presumes that there is a thesis, which can be anything from an idea to a thing, that usually takes an anti-thesis, and the conflict is usually resolved by creating a synthesis. However, with Nazareth the synthesis does not seem to follow a particular schema, rather a name or

thing can trigger a series of syntheses or twinnings as Nazareth prefers to call it. However, to illustrate the concept in Nazareth, I remember an incident in 2001 when Nazareth phoned me about the water that broke into his basement, while he and family were on vacation, and damaged the bookcases, the cupboard, and the desk. When I saw Nazareth around the same time, he took me to his house in Coralville, and we went down to the basement. I was so impressed with the newly built bookcases, the desk, and the cupboards. But Nazareth, several business cards in hands, began to tell me, in a voice full with awe and amazement about coincidences that sound like mysterious workings of a divine intervention. After seven years I could not remember the exact events, apart from the carpenter's name being Conrad. So I wrote an email to Nazareth reminding him of Conrad the carpenter as a good example of his power of syntheses. He wrote me back recalling the details of the episode:

> Saadi,
>
> About the carpenter who built my computer desk and the bookcases and the cupboards downstairs. All the desks and bookcases were considered by the insurance to be damaged and to be replaced. I asked the Reconstructors whether they had someone who could custom build everything and they said they had. When he came to see me, his name was Doran Conrad! Doran is almost an anagram of Conrad – Doran C onrad. I took this as a sign from the gods and told him to go ahead on condition that he signed the desk underneath, which he did. A further twinning is that when I next met my former student Kurtz who took my Conrad class the second time I taught it, in 1990, I told him the story and he said to me, "Oh yes, Doran Conrad is a cousin of my wife."
>
> Of course, the name Kurtz is significant. He wrote on Lloyd Fernando's novel *Scorpion Orchid* and *Lord Jim*. Fernando was a Malaysian, a Conrad scholar, one-time chair of the English Department (who studied at Leeds same time as I did). I told Kurtz to send him his paper, which had been accepted by *Conradiana*. I met Fernando in Kuala Lumpur in 1994 when I went there for a conference on Asian writers and he told me that the new edition of his novel was out and he had quoted from Kurtz as a blurb. He gave me money to buy a copy, and. I gave the copy to Kurtz. Fernando had written on Kurtz and now Kurtz was writing on him.
>
> Best, Peter

Now psychologically, why does one need to establish connections between things? My theory of the need to establish connections between things different and disparate is informed by particular culture and psychology. Nazareth was born in 1940 to parents from two different cultures, the mother is from Malaysia and the father is from Goa. So technically Nazareth was born from three cultures, that is, African-Malayan-Goan. With this fragmentation comes the need for linking, or bridging that later develops into keen sense of synthesising. In this aspect the power of synthesis is similar to the power that creates metaphor. The essence of metaphor is in the finding similarity between two dissimilar things. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the

ability to create metaphors is the hallmark of a literary mind.[2] For instance, Nazareth begins his discussion of Thumboo by a significant synthesis: "Although that was the first time we [Nazareth and Thumboo] were meeting, we did have a connection with each other. He had directed the Master's dissertation of Theo Luzuka, the Ugandan who designed the cover of my first novel" (2). The very language Nazareth uses describing the synthesis seems to suggest that although that was the first time they were meeting physically, Nazareth establishes a synthesis through which he met Thumboo spiritually through the connection with Luzuka. It is interesting to note that the upshot of many of the syntheses is spiritual; even in the episode of Conrad the carpenter, there is "a sign from the gods."

In the section titled "Muse" (123-39), there are multiple syntheses. The section begins by discussing Thumboo's poem entitled "Father I." The focus of the discussion is Christianity of the father and its impact on the son, Thumboo. The poem informs us that the speaker, presumably Thumboo, came to Christianity late. But Nazareth points out the poem titled "The Visitor" that follows "Father – 4" in an anthology titled *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation, Anthology of Singapore Poetry*. The poem is a story about a child, baby Edwin, who was seriously sick, and was healed by the mysterious friendly visitor. That poem and its visitor were used as evidence by Nazareth to conclude, "What we do know is that Christ was there in Edwin's life, not as theology or fundamentalist religion, but as a humane being who helped heal and feed the sick" (125). That experience reminds Nazareth of his own experience with sickness as child. Apparently he, like child Edwin, was saved by a Christian intervention. In gratitude, Nazareth vowed that if he recovered he would become a priest. Nazareth continued meditating about that experience, "I did not become a priest but maybe my writing is a way of keeping my promise." And here is one central value of the use of synthesis: it helps one to objectify his own inner experience allowing him to examine it in comparison with other experiences. Being synthesised, Nazareth, recognising that "the poem opened up memories for me," began to reflect on his own novels in what seems to be a new, spiritual light:

> My first novel was narrated by someone who feels guilty and confesses; his name is 'Deo,' which means 'God.' My second novel seems to be written by an omniscient narrator but when we get to the Epilogue, we realise that it was written by the character who calls himself Ronald D'Cruz, and maybe he is on the cross because he feels guilty, and maybe he heeded the cry of the suffering people who called on 'Mungu' (God the father) so he decided to be God as artist and punish in the last chapter (a stylised, comic book chapter) everyone who needed to be punished. (126)

The second major synthesis in this section occurs between two poets, Sasenarine Persaud and Edwin Thumboo, with Nazareth as the medium for the synthesising

[2] See G.M.A. Grube, trans. *Aristotle on Poetry and Style*. Aristotle states concerning metaphors, "The right use of metaphors is a sign of inborn talent and cannot be learned from anyone else; it comes from the ability to observe similarities in things" (49).

process. Nazareth gives us the account of the interaction between the two poets: "I quoted earlier the response to 'Krishna' by Sasenarine Persaud. His response was not the end, it was a beginning. After reading the poem, he wrote to me." When I read the text of the letter from Persaud to Nazareth I immediately noticed that the letter is not about "Krishna," actually it is about "Ulysses by the Merlion." To resolve this issue, I assumed that a typo occurred either with the title, "Krishna," which must have been "Ulysses by the Merlion," or an omission of this title happened immediately "After reading the poem ["Ulysses by the Merlion"]." However, Nazareth aptly demonstrates by letter and by poetry the synthetic connection that had taken place between the poets, Persaud, and Thumboo. By letter, Nazareth produces what seems to be the entire letter of Persaud to him in which Persaud documents his admiration of Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion":

> I was moved by the range of the poet and wondered what else I had on Thumboo. I remembered *Voices: An Anthology of World Writing in English* published a decade ago, in which I had a poem. There was Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion." I read it and was immediately moved by Thumboo's profound weaving in and out and of history and the contemporary, which becomes history almost as soon as it is born and experienced…. What moved me most and stayed with me was the line "I have kept faith." It is a line which haunts anyone who seeks truth, who seeks to enter into and understand the past and in doing so understand present and future. A reader reacts not merely to words but what is beyond words, to a sense of oneness, to soul or spirit, in a great poem. The poem had also touched the mythmaker in me, and I had the genesis of my own response, my own poem, in that instant. (126)

This is a fascinating account of what might be called the chemical affinity that makes synthesis possible between individuals. As mentioned above, the essence of the synthesis is spiritual or mystical. When Persaud says reflectively, "A reader reacts not merely to words but what is beyond words, to a sense of oneness, to soul or spirit, in a great poem," he inadvertently puts his finger on his own mystical experience since he was desperately searching for the right word. By definition, mystical means ambiguity of the experience; yet, it is highly aesthetic and profoundly spiritual. Hence the inseparable link between the mystical and the poetic. Nazareth comments on Persaud's letter with an intriguing rhetorical question: "Can anything more be said about the poetry of Edwin Thumboo than has been said by Persaud?" Nazareth's answer: "Yes. The poem by Persaud triggered off by 'Ulysses by the Merlion'" seems even more intriguing than his question, though it makes a lot of sense in the context of a poet avowedly influenced by another poet. So what can we specifically find in Persaud's poem more than what he already said in his letter about Thumboo's poetry? What Nazareth seems to suggest by referring us to Persaud's poem titled "Odysseys, My Love" is:

> The response of a poet descended from Mother India to an older poet descended from the same great mother, one of whose ancestors moved West and the other East according to the needs of European imperialism. (128)

Yet despite all the history of diasporic fragmentations,

> Poet calls to and replies to Poet across time and space, following the imperative to rewrite history. Both poets are responding to the place of their birth, creating poetry that speaks ultimately to the whole world. (129)

Delight of Influence

In the act of synthesis, one should be willing to be synthesised, and there should be at the beginning a sense of admiration, and even delight to be influenced in order to go through synthesis successfully. The two processes, synthesis and delight of influence are inseparably linked, as we have already witnessed that link in the genesis of Persaud's poem, "Odysseys, My Love." Neither the delight of influence nor the synthesis can make the literary production mere imitation. What happened to an author under the influence? Can he or she retain originality, individuality? But before discussing authorship in literary works, I need to define what I mean by "delight of influence." I was inspired to find the term "delight of influence" in Nazareth's memoir in which he retells his literary collaboration in 1974 with Nigerian writer Cyprian Ekwensi (born 1921). The very title of Nazareth's memoir, "What Cyprian Ekwensi Did for Me," dances with joy and gratitude. Nazareth begins by recalling his early awareness of Ekwensi: "I read writers Ngugi had recommended. Among them was Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* [1961]. It was a striking novel whose protagonist became part of my memory even though I did not re-read the novel for several years." Nazareth also read the few critics of African literature, and although most critics were interested in finding fault with Ekwensi, comparing him unfavourably with Chinua Achebe (born in 1930), Nazareth was not impressed. And their collaboration began in 1974, when Ekwensi was one of the first guests at the International Writing Program and Nazareth was already a member and working as Research Associate. And here is the genesis of a very important novel that prophesied and chronicled the second exodus of the Asians from Uganda who were uprooted in their first exodus by colonial powers.

> I was talking to Ekwensi one day about Idi Amin and what was happening in Uganda. He said, 'My God! You have the novel in your head! Write it!' 'That's funny!' I said. 'That's exactly what Jose Antonio Bravo, the novelist from Peru in my session of the IWP, said to me the night before he left Iowa! And he wrote in a strange way. He planned his novels like an architect, with large sheets of paper on which he drew categories of major characters, minor characters, theme, story, chronology, etc., and when it was ready, he wrote.' 'Good,' said Ekwensi. 'Let me show you how I do it.' He took me to his room – and there was a large sheet of paper on the desk on which he had drawn categories of major characters, minor characters, chronology, etc. This was too much, I said to myself.

Nazareth bought large sheets from Iowa Book and Supply, began planning the novel, and it took off. In nine days, Nazareth had an almost complete novel. He continues:

> 'However, I have one big problem,' I said to Ekwensi. 'In real life, when Amin announced the Expulsion of Asians and gave them a deadline of three months, the time seemed so short it made everybody and everything frantic. But in the novel, three months is such a long time that it does not persuade the reader that there is any reason for the people to get frantic.' 'Why don't you change the Expulsion deadline from "three months" to "the next moon?"' he suggested. 'Amin is a Muslim so reference to the moon is not illogical. And while people are rushing around to find out what "by the next moon" means, that will explain why everything gets frantic.' So I did make the change. In my novel *The General is Up*, the Expulsion deadline announced by the General is the next moon. It worked.

So as we can see from the interaction between the two artists, the older with his rich expertise plays the role of the Muse. Unlike the majority of western writers, Ekwensi and Nazareth do not suffer from Bloom's the anxiety of influence; rather they both delight in being influenced by each other. The date is very significant, for in 1973 Harold Bloom spread the virus of the anxiety of influence by publishing his book *The Anxiety of Influence*[3] while Nazareth and Ekwensi in 1974 were establishing the delight of influence, another aspect of turning the fragmented into synthesis of beauty. What is the fragmented in Nazareth's experience that Ekwensi's presence helps synthesise? From Nazareth's account of how Ekwensi works, one can see that Ekwensi's method of writing helps Nazareth to learn the objectification of his internal experience into an external one in which all parts and pieces can be easily connected. Significantly, Nazareth describes his writing of the novel in terms that evoke synthesising:

> It was like a dam had burst, swallowing up (to mix metaphors) *everything, including three fragments* I had written, one in Uganda before leaving to accept the Seymour Lustman Fellowship at Yale granted for my first novel (*In a Brown Mantle*), the second after I got to Yale, and the third at Iowa City, *fragments I thought were unrelated* ("What Cyprian Ekwensi Did for Me"; emphasis added)

Typical of any creation, Nazareth's is paradoxical and dialectical; paradoxical because the experience shatters the dam into fragments, but at the same time the

[3] A reader of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) cannot miss the presence of Freud as a subtext. For the anxiety of influence is actually a translation of Freud's Oedipal theory, that a son has to kill at least metaphorically his father in order to become independent. So the poet, in order to become mature has to struggle against his precursors' influence. Well, the world literary history is full with examples of great poets and writers who embraced greater poets and learnt from them with no anxiety. And the examples of literary influence I discuss in this paper indicate that rather than anxiety there is delight and joy in being influenced. See Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*.

artistic consciousness is at work synthesising the useful fragments. It is dialectical as well because there is a thesis, that is, the will, or desire induced or inspired by Ekwensi to write a novel versus the antithesis symbolised in general terms by the dam. The clash between the artist's will and the dam ended by smashing the dam into pieces, and the flood begins. The dominant image now is of absolute chaos. But the artist's will, which has been identifying itself with the water, will soon get things under control and tidy. And the synthesis begins to emerge as the work of art: *The General is Up*. Besides the obvious image of the entire process as an artistic birth giving, Nazareth's experience can be classified as a genuine artistic experience according to well-known Egyptian psychologist, Musttafa Suwayf, who studies the typical artistic experience by interviewing and analysing tens of Egyptian well-known and established poets in his pioneering study in Arabic titled *Al-Usus al Nefsiah lil-Ibda'a al-Fanni* (The Psychological Foundations of the Artistic Creation).[4] He concludes by identifying common aspects such as water bursting in rhythmic waves, the physical aches, the loss of the sense of time, the freshness and feeling renewed.

In the interaction between two artists such as Sasenarine Persaud and Edwin Thumboo, and Peter Nazareth and Cyprian Ekwensi, although the interaction is different in each case, both cases concern literary production under a model. Both writers, Nazareth and Persaud, did not produce a copy of their model; rather the model was used by both of them as a catalyst that makes changes happen. As critics, we can analyse the texts and compare them in style, diction, figures of speech, tone, literary allusion (or intertextuality), use of myth or mythmaking in poetry. Since it would take more time and more space to compare Nazareth's *The General is Up* with Ekwensi's fiction in order to analyse the literary work that has been produced under the synthesis and the delight of influence in terms of originality or lack of it, I have chosen as a matter of convenience, to examine the elements of diction and theme in two poems, Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion" as the model and the response to it, Persaud's "Odysseys, My Love." In his discussion of Thumboo's poetry in the section significantly titled "Muse," (123-39) Nazareth quotes a lengthy letter from Persaud to him. As we discussed above, the letter reflects Persaud's admiration of Thumboo's poetry and his fascination in particular with "Ulysses by the Merlion." Then Nazareth launches a rhetorical question: "Can anything more be said about Edwin Thumboo's poetry than has been said by Persaud?" And Nazareth answers, "Yes. The poem by Persaud triggered off by "Ulysses by the Merlion'" (137). After reading this section again and again I can see in it now a more profound meaning. It seems to me that Nazareth was saying that, Persaud says everything there's to be said about Thumboo as a poet, but he forgets to mention that Thumboo is the poet and the muse at the same time. Hence comes, it seems to me, the significance of title of the section "Muse."

In terms of diction and the theme(s) it evokes, Thumboo's poem, because of use of Western mythology, is easier to follow. Persaud's poem, equally original as I shall demonstrate, borrows one line from Thumboo's poem, that is, "I have kept faith," but

[4] Mustafá Suwayf, *al-Usus al-nafsiyah lil-ibda` al-fanni fi al-shi`r khassatan-al-Qahirah*, J.M.`A.: Dar al-Ma`arif, al-Tab`ah 4., mazidah wa -munaqqahah., 1981 (The Psychological Foundations of the Artistic Creation, in Poetry in Particular). See in particular chapters 5 and 7.

Persaud creates deftly a different context for his faith keeping tinged with the dominant irony announced in the title, but it becomes apparent in the last stanza. Thumboo's strategy is subtle; by beginning with identifying himself with Ulysses, he travelled heroically, and suffered Circe, Scylla, and Calypso. Actually the speaker becomes, after successfully passing all the ritualistic tests, a Ulysses in his own right. By the last line of the first stanza the speaker declares himself as capable of mythmaking. And immediately he begins making myths. We should never forget that the speaker is a Ulysses, the wily mythmaker, who comes by this small island, and he beholds "But this lion of the sea" with so genuine awe that it is contagious to readers:

> Nothing, nothing in my days
> Foreshadowed this
> Half-beast, half-fish
> This powerful creature of land and sea.

I agree with Nazareth concerning Dennis Haskell's criticism of the poem as being conventional. Worse than that, Haskell's sarcastic observation: "Even as tourist attraction the Merlion counts for little, and a hunk of plastic stuck on a promontory hardly matches Circe, Scylla, Charybdis (37). I think there are two problematic issues here. The first one ideological and political that argues Western civilisation and arts cannot be matched by any other arts, which betrays an Orientalist arrogance. The second issue concerns lack of knowledge of the nature of mythology. For mythology cannot be weighed by stone or plastic or paper. Rather, it is a work of human imagination on human imagination.

Thumboo's and Persaud's poems differ in their choice of diction and in several other essential ways. Why for instance does Persaud, who is avowedly fascinated by Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion," choose to go back to ancient Greek and use Odysseys, which is a very playful choice, instead of Ulysses? Nazareth insightfully observes:

> Persaud reverts to the original version of the name, Odysseus, from which comes the word "odyssey," which means wanderings, since Odysseus wandered for ten years. When Thumboo uses the Latin version (probably taken from the Etruscan "Ulixes"), he is putting the emphasis on the person, on the traveller, and given the resonance in the name (Latin, from Etruscan, from Greek), the emphasis is on multiculturalism. Persaud has returned to the Greek version and substituted for the person the word arising from his name. The poet's love is the "odyssey," or actually many odysseys. (128)

Hence, each poet uses Odysseus/Ulysses to fit his own poetic vision. However, one thing remains unclear: Why does Thumboo choose Ulysses but not Odysseus? Could it be the musical quality of the name Ulysses? Or could it be other reasons?

Furthermore, Thumboo uses the mask of Ulysses to create national mythology that seems superior even to the ancient Greek mythology as the speaker/Ulysses whispers these words in utter awe and admiration: "Nothing, nothing in my days/

Foreshadowed this/ half-beast, half-fish/ this powerful creature of land and sea." On the other hand, Persaud, who declares his love is Odysseys in the title, proclaims in the last stanza (Is there a difference between Ulysses and his actions?):

> I have kept the faith, I tell you – Ulysses'
> Nothing and Rama's knowing Hanuman's
> Chest, when opened to Sita, is a flower
> Still scented and waiting your touch. (qtd. in Nazareth 128)

This last stanza raises several issues, first Ulysses, not Odysseys, is dismissed as nothing compared with Rama. We should remember that in the second line of the poem, that is, "It is easier for Rama/ Or Ulysses, whom you may know/ Better." Who is "you"? There are only two possibilities: either the speaker is talking to himself or to another person, but we should not miss the mildly chastising tone in the phrase: "Or Ulysses, whom you may know better." The other important issue here is, why Ulysses? And why Odysseys, the love of travel, as Nazareth has aptly remarked (128), which is also the object of love, kept waiting in the title, never welcome in the poem? Persaud's insistence on differentiation between Odysseys and Ulysses makes me suspect, without having evidence, that there is a dialogue between the speaker in here and the speaker in Thumboo's poem "Ulysses by the Merlion."

Although the two poems seem to have a similar theme, that is employing the Greek mythology of Ulysses or Odysseys (an allegory of wanderlust), they appear distinct under careful examination. Let's begin first by identifying what is the function of Ulysses in Thumboo's poem. As mentioned above, Ulysses is used as a mask, which is discarded in the middle of the poem, for a new mythical reality already established, the Merlion that has eclipsed Ulysses and rendered him nothing, as nothing as "Ulysses' Nothing" in the last stanza of Persaud's poem. After all, how can a Ulysses live without a people? For the people in the poem, the people of Singapore, have found their native mythic hero. Nativity or nationality is crucial here:

> Perhaps having dealt with things,
> Surfeited on them, their spirits yearn again for images,
> Adding to the dragon, phoenix,
> Garuda, naga those horses of the sun,
> This lion of the sea,
> This image of themselves.

On the relationship between myth, meaning, and identity, Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* analyses the power of myth as being located primarily in the particulars of a given discourse:

> Myth has an imperative, buttonholing character; stemming from an historical concept, directly springing from contingency…. it is *I* whom it has come to seek. It is turned towards me, I am subjected to its intentional force, and it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity. (124)

The key phrase here is "stemming from an historical concept," which explains why without nationality, without a history linked to the passions, emotions, and feelings of a people, myth would have no efficacy in the life of a people.

In comparing the Ulysses in Thumboo with Ulysses in Persaud, one can see at least in one sense that the entire poem, "Odysseys, My Love," is a lyrical interpretation of "Ulysses by the Merlion." Nonetheless, the speaker in Persaud's is not interested in creating a new myth; he dismisses Ulysses as nothing, agreeing completely with the speaker in Thumboo's. But after this point, the two speakers diverge: Thumboo's goes on to create a new myth in Merlion, while Persaud's rediscovers in the dusty depths of his collective unconscious Rama and Sita with the blessings of Hanuman, the propitiator against all evil.

So the two poems, in diction and theme, though sometimes agree, most of the times they sing different tunes. Especially in diction, which determines the personae of poetry according to Winifred Nowottny,[5] we find that the poets use distinctly different choice of words. While Thumboo uses words in rapid, staccato images in order to give an account of Ulysses and move on to Merlion. Significantly, we notice that the rapid rhythm slows down gradually as Ulysses was struck with amazement at the sight of "this/ half-beast, half-fish." What slows the rhythm or makes it faster is the diction. As the speaker begins to narrate the history of the people of Singapore, the rhythm slows down:

> Peoples settled here,
> Brought to this island
> The bounty of these seas,
> Built Towers topless as Ilium's

If one examines the first syllables in the first stanza – "I have sailed many waters,/ Skirted islands of fire,/ Contended with Circe/ Who loved the squeal of pigs" – one can see the source of the quickening of the rhythm in the first stanza: I believe the choice of action verbs, that is, "I have sailed," "skirted," "contended," and "who loved" drives the rhythm faster.

In Persaud's poem, a different diction produces different rhythms. For instance, the rhythm begins as quiet and meditative in the first stanza:

> It was easier for Rama
> Or Ulysses, whom you may know
> Better – I too have kept faith
> With Ithaca having never returned

[5] In the chapter titled "Diction," Nowottny believes that "(t)he central fact still is that in so far as a particular kind of *persona* is necessary to the poem, the poet's diction must create it." In the next page, he elaborates: "The clarity and assurance with which the poet can direct us towards his own valuation of an object are often the result of his using a diction which, in the act of specifying the object, pre-selects the point of view from which it is to be seen" (42-43).

In an hundred years or more.

The rhythm will pick up in the next few lines. The emotional lift-off begins with the name of the miraculous Hanuman:

Hanuman –
Who? That one you may call
'The monkey God' was neither monkey
Nor man; my tail lit by a king's pride
Is torching a city, the yellow-red flames
Visible across the gulf. Why did we leave?
Or was that I, I, I, – (qtd. in Nazareth 127)

The poem reaches its highest emotion, and language loses its semantic power and utters a universal wailing sound "Why did we leave?/ Or was that I, I, I," that makes all readers, even those prejudiced against Hinduism, become appreciative of it. And herein lies the power of great poetry to transcend religion, politics, class, and nation. The "Why did we leave?" is a powerful cry that resonates with the nostalgic guilt and regret ever since Adam left Paradise. It hits one of the most sensitive archetypes in our humanity.

In analysing similarities and differences between the two poems, "Ulysses by the Merlion" and "Odysseys, My Love," my aim was to demonstrate that literary works produced under synthesis and delight of influence can be original and unique. And, in addition to Persaud's original poem, we have in our support the works of the great synthesiser, that is, most of Shakespeare's synthetic plays and sonnets as powerful examples.

Conclusion

As far as I know, there has been no study of Peter Nazareth as a literary critic. There have been studies on him as a creative writer. The idea of this essay on Nazareth as a literary citric began as I was reading his book *Edwin Thumboo: Creating A Nation Though poetry* (2008). I was struck by the innovative approach to Thumboo's poetry which Nazareth opens up through what I called synthesis and delight of influence. And throughout the book, Nazareth, unlike any critic I know, is not afraid to put his own work out on the table for discussion, comparison, or even critique. Hence I dubbed Nazareth as a communal critic, who does not have any tendency to dominate the discussion of a text. In his discussion of the Thumboo book, one can hear in addition to Nazareth's voice, many other voices such as Ishmael Reed, P.M.H. Atwater, Bessie Head, Sasenarine Persaud, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kirpal Singh, just to mention only a few. Nazareth never hesitates to say I do not know, or I do not understand a poem. At one point in the book, he invites via email several critics to help explain a poem. Yet he is not a passive receiver, for he is alert to point out weaknesses and problematic statements.

As for the essay I have just written, I feel deep down, it is incomplete, at best it is a work in progress. For in order to do justice to a complex writer-critic such as Peter

Nazareth I believe I need to read his other six books of literary criticism and the majority of his numerous articles in order to have a good and satisfactory analysis of the main trends and major characteristics of the critical thought and method of Nazareth. Although I have the intention to expand this essay into a book that will discuss major literary works by Nazareth, I think it is safer to leave it for God to give us more time and more energy to finish the work I just began. For, as the Arabs would say, life is short and work is long,[6] and all depends on God's will. Amen ya Rub al-Ala'alameen.

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[6] The saying, "life is short, and work is long, etc," is not originally an Arab saying. Like many things Arabic, it traces back to ancient Greek. Hippocrates (460?-377?BC), regarded the father of modern medicine, begins his book titled *The Aphorisms* by stating "Life is short, the art is long, occasion sudden, to make experiments dangerous , judgment difficult" (9).

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