When my husband heard that I had been invited to speak at a symposium on writers in exile, he burst out bitterly, “But you are not in exile!”

Indeed for him, sharing a child and living in domestic quarters with me for over fifteen years, it is intolerable to think of me, his wife, as someone who is not at home where she is. The condition of exile is problematic not only for the individual who carries it with her, like a snail with its heavy horned shell, but for the people and country she claims to be exiled from and for the host family which nourishes and supports her in her impoverishment.

Exile immediately presupposes the sense of involuntary removal; it connotes dispossession, displacement, discontentment. As removal from an original and significant place, a homeland, an ancestral plot, it implies movement from inside, with the sense of wholeness, integrity, shelter, belonging, empowerment, to outside, with the multiple negative associations of being outcast, of ostracism, marginalization, estrangement, enfeeblement, rootlessness, disintegration, and loss. The original political use of the term, to punish a citizen by banishment from family, home, and social power to solitary existence among unfriendly strangers, persists today unambiguously, together with a host of new and modern permutations. It persists because the truth of state authoritarianism has not changed. From ancient Greek city-states to recently created African nations, politicians have strategically dispossessed their opposition, stripped them of the rights of citizenship, in order to enforce their own legitimacy and rule. In claiming exile, therefore, the individual is crying foul against a state; is asserting a condition of inequality and injustice at the hand of an oppressing force.

But now one reads of social scientists and historians defining such a thing as voluntary exile. Is voluntary exile the condition by which an individual chooses to remove himself from a centre from which he has already been excluded? If free choice is implied by the modifier, “voluntary,” does that freedom extend to those conditions prevailing at the centre which lead inevitably to the
hard road of departure? Or do we have in the phrase “voluntary exile” one of those remarkable ironies of the modern political consciousness, where one denies the reality of state aggression by positing the individual’s power to escape or circumvent it?

As for me, I have for a long time seen myself as nothing but an individual. This self-image of “an individual” is the bottom of a descent, from nation and community. Growing up as a native-born Chinese Malaysian, I was surrounded by the solid structures of a large extended family, a narrow parochial convent education, a small-town tropical and pluralistic mentality, and the international English language. Nothing about my life was exotic or strange to me; the quiddities of normalcy are the sacred ground from which every writer begins. Nor was it odd that at the age of fifteen and sixteen, we Malacca children were asked to write essays in English on the meaning of democracy, on the topic of Malaysia for the Malaysians. Why should we doubt that our country was for us? We were in no way well-off, but as urbanized and English-educated students we anticipated a future which would include us and in which we were told repeatedly we would be the leaders of tomorrow.

If history were a process whereby expectations came true, perhaps it would have no place for exiles! That sense of destiny so casually instilled into my generation of Malaysians: where is it now? For the country has taken another path, another destination. The process of nation-building is never easy or harmonious, but for those whom it would exclude, it can never be acceptable without a struggle to influence it to larger, more integrative ends.

This struggle is waged by the parties in internal exile, by those whose contributions and services, and in like manner, whose rewards are denied in the present and future of the nation. These are the real heroes, who have not abandoned their vision of their place under the sun, and who daily live in the presence of political absence; their identities to be rendered invisible so as to enable the easier deprivation of their rights. When one group finds it difficult to stand up and say its name; when to say one’s identity is already to mark one as lesser than, that is where the boundaries of exile begin.

Many English-language writers in Malaysia have found their foundations shifted in the last twenty years. Poised in 1957 with the attainment of independence to participate in the political fullness of nationhood, they have found instead historical definitions which exclude them. The only national literature, it is promulgated, is literature in the national language. This definition starkly underlines the movement to restrict national identity to a monocultural and monolingual position, a constitutional decision which cannot be debated under pain of imprisonment without habeas corpus. Indeed, for many English-language writers brought up to respect their country’s constitution, this promulgation is a more effective silencer than tanks and barbed-wire. As a lover of one’s country who cannot but wish good for its future, one must cut one’s tongue off before one criticizes its law. And indeed I have little wish to criticize, for a newer and younger generation born without that particular sense of destiny that we were imbued with must be free to struggle with its evolution of nationhood. But as a free-floating individual, with my tongue still intact although my roots are cut, I can lament and record.

Andrew Graham-Yool in an essay made a distinction between the whiners who had given up hope of returning to the homeland and those exiles filled with energy who worked surely towards the day of their return. Between the two groups, I am the whiner. Yet I can always return. The flight from New York where I now live to my home town would take no more than two days of steady travel. More separates me from my original place than distance. Educated to have my talents of service to my society, I know now that my particular linguistic talents are instead viewed as irrelevant to the official line on national development today. Proud of my abilities, I had seen myself when young as belonging to an intellectual and creative elite, helping to shape and create the features of this brave new pluralistic Southeast Asian world. Now the hour for that elite has been taken away, and another had taken up its position.

The unpleasant news about those in exile, whether internal or external, is that unless they overcome paralysis, history will be shaped without them. This exile, after all, has nothing in common with the metaphysical indulgences of individuals who disdain history in the light of existentialist perspectives. “Existence before essence” is all very well for a Frenchman who is so Eurocentrically positioned that from the bosom of his city and his language he dared play