with ideas of nothingness and being. But for persons who in their lifetimes have found themselves acted upon so that their sense of selves, the essence of their cultural beings has become progressively denied and marginalized, their deracination is political first rather than philosophical and results from an assault on core identities, whether ethnic, racial, linguistic, or personal.

This assault was clearly formulated under colonial conditions. The suppression of education in the native languages in favour of English-language and British-subject education was a deliberate policy of the British colonial administrators whether in Ghana, India or Malaysia. Simultaneously there was a dismantling of traditional native social and economic structures, replaced by western laws and innovations of agricultural, industrial and mining ventures which would prove most profitable for western economic interests. The destruction and suppression of native customs, languages and economic structures, it is true, occurred together with the instruction in and replacement by western languages, customs, and economic structures. The many positive improvements in living standards (which are real and indisputable, such as better nutrition, improved medical care and water supplies, a more rational and equitable justice system) masked for a long time the many negative consequences of westernization on non-western peoples: the loss in cultural esteem, the empty aping of alien manners which filled in the vacuum after the loss of ancient traditions, the change from culture-production to culture-consumption and the consequent disintegration of social cohesion and communal values, and so on. Any individual coming from a colonial and post-colonial society, as most of the current professionals in Third World countries do, feels the force of these brief historical statements in her life.

Alienation to such an individual is not a philosophical abstraction but a political fact. For many Malaysians of my generation, the language we loved and were most at home in was not our mother tongue, be it Urdu or Hindi or Mandarin or Cantonese, but the tongue of the white man we were educated to fear and admire, English. The Irish nuns who taught me to read Tennyson, themselves children of colonialism, did their jobs well. I not only learned to read, but I also learned to love; I not only learned to imitate, but I wished to belong. For this personal outcome it is not the Irish women I have to thank but the English language itself and its manifestations in literature.

Thus, when the colonial world came to an end in August 1957 in the then Federation of Malaya, I rejoiced in the emergence of my people into their moment of liberation; but I naively expected the sun never to set on the English language. In the quarrel between national identity, as defined by a monocultural and monolingual ideology, and the English language, I recognize that I am not only a whiner but a potential troublemaker. English is to much a part of my identity, confused as it already is ethnically, racially and culturally, that I cannot abandon it for any overriding purpose. Yet I do not believe in the hegemony of English in the international scene; I would always want the wonderful babble of poly-languages about me, for I grew up in a world where I spoke three languages and heard another ten on either hand. And perhaps like a duckling who was hatched in the presence of a cocker-spaniel and waddles in order to wag its non-existent imprinted tail, I waddle rather than romp my way through pages of English prose.

Still, for all that, English is my calling. I make my living teaching it to native speakers, I clean up the grammar of English professors, I dream in its rhythms, and I lose myself for whole hours and days in its words, its syntaxes, its motions and its muscled ideas. Reading it and writing it is the closest experience I have ever had to feeling infinity in my presence.

Idealizing the language, I do not mean to idealize the English-language user. A Filipino writer, explaining why he wrote in English despite the resurgence of Tagalog or Filipino, the national language, after the Philipines won its independence from the United States in 1952, said, "I did not choose the language; it chose me." Another Filipino writer defends his choice of English as a historical accident. Everywhere where colonial masters have left and brown and colored people have entered into the halls of parliaments and universities to rule themselves, English has remained as that accidental stain on a people’s intelligence and spirit. Leaders can only hope to purify their tribes by sacrificing whole generations of educated intelligentsia; or they can attempt to contain the linguistic contagion by limiting mastery of it to a few privileged elect. In either case they are also condemning their societies to economically regressive and authoritarian measures. The Third-