

The Paradox of Being



Muthal Naidoo

THE
PARADOX
OF
BEING

(poems and essays)

Muthal Naidoo

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Words

my word is my bond
my bond, my honour
my soul in my word
I break my word
I damn my soul
but words are air,
abstract,
easily blown off;

how many times a day
I commit myself to hell
a metaphor
a word
abstract
easily blown off,
as is heaven
a rose by another name
that smells even sweeter

all is irony
laughable fantasy
creating aspirations
in abstract words
and damning them
in concrete deeds

every event we celebrate
 we dedicate to the triumph
 of the human spirit in its fight
 to overcome
 natural instinct
 that breaks the bond
 consigning us inexorably
 to the paradox of our reality.

so we create tall tales
 of knights in shining armour
 superheroes, noble saviours
 metaphors
 escape into other worlds
 worlds of abstract words
 to save us from ourselves.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP):

The Logic Of Systems

Standardization, division of labour, assembly and time lines, formalized in the development of industrialism, became operational procedures for all institutions, and gave rise to huge bureaucracies based on standardization of human beings and human interactions. Standardization is based on the recognition of commonalities; all human beings have bodies with a head, torso and limbs; all human beings need food, shelter and clothing. As we are all basically the same and function in basically the same ways, we and our functions can be broken down into parts that are common to all. The breaking down of objects and processes into parts, i.e., analysis, then assembling them into wholes – synthesis – are principles that inform the way in which our lives are organized.

In *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler describes processes as ‘structures’ with component parts ... “hammered and bolted together” to form systems. For example, the system (machinery) of representation in government consists of the following component parts that are integrated as on an assembly line in a factory:

- “1. Individuals armed with a vote; 2. Parties for collecting votes; 3. Elected representatives; 4. Legislatures (parliaments); 5. Executives

(Presidents, Prime Ministers, etc.) who [feed] raw material into the lawmaking machine in the form of policies, and then [enforce] the resulting laws.” (85)

Systems become reified and once one enters a system one is carried along by its momentum. Locked into its logic, it becomes difficult to challenge the process.

For instance:

if you develop breast cancer, you are into a cycle of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, medication for five years, annual mammograms and blood tests. These are standard procedures that apply irrespective of individual differences.

If your child is missing and you ask for assistance from the police, they refer to standard operating procedures: no assistance for 48 hours.

Standard operating procedures (SOP) take on greater significance than the individual and may or may not meet individual needs.

And the cell phone has been incorporated into SOP. I had to assert my right over SOP at a big so-called discount department store when I bought a small stove for the small flat into which I have moved. As I didn't have a cell phone and my landline had not yet been transferred to the flat, I was without telephone communication. The salesperson, inured to SOP, said it made delivery of the stove precarious despite the fact that I assured him that I would be at home all day on the day of delivery and the security guard at the complex gate would call me when the delivery arrived. All the driver

of the delivery van needed to do was give the security guard the number of my flat. My not having a telephone seemed an insurmountable difficulty. When the stove did not arrive on the appointed day, I threatened to cancel the transaction. The stove was delivered the next day.

The logic of systems is to be found in SOP. In Schools, for example, SOP requires that knowledge is broken down into levels, from Grade 1 to Grade 12 and into disciplines – science, arts, languages, etc, and further into subjects – maths, physics, chemistry etc. And subjects are assembled into curriculum packages.

A pupil in a school, the consumer of packaged knowledge, is also raw material that has to be processed, i.e., fitted with standardized knowledge along the assembly line of Grades and curricula. We take for granted this form of acquiring knowledge. We accept the logic of starting in Grade 1 and proceeding to Grade 12 and the curriculum that is organised to place us at different levels and in different categories. We also accept assessment procedures that enable us to move from grade to grade. Assessment is a measure of the extent to which a learner absorbs and conforms to packaged knowledge.

All are treated as the same; all are required to comply with SOP. The closest that one can get to recognition of individual difference is in the creation of categories – the division of the general group into smaller groups. But categorisation still recognises the group, not the individual and still caters for the group rather than the individual. If a pupil is interested in the arts and the sciences, there is usually no package at school that allows for this dual interest. A Leonardo da Vinci, for example, cannot be catered for in

schools. Leonardo, fortunately, did not need school; he was way beyond its packaged processes. Standardization ignores the complexity of the individual and reduces her to type – small, medium, large, extra-large for example. Psychiatry is a means we have devised to assist those who deviate greatly from norms (SOP) to fit into standard patterns of behaviour. We judge people by their ability to fit into the logic of systems – norms, SOP.

We do not question the logic that informs the functioning of organizations and institutions and of society as a whole. Thus, as in school where assessment procedures determine whether we are at the top or bottom in our compliance with SOP, so in society we become fixed in its hierarchical structuring. Power is at the top echelons of systems where managers are responsible for maintaining SOP. At the lowest level are workers, learners, ordinary citizens, who are made to conform to SOP.

The division of work into graduating steps along an assembly line, gave rise to a new class system. Those at the lower levels of processes came to be regarded as less capable and those at higher levels as highly competent. That led to the development of classes based on function and to the standardization of prejudice in terms of work levels. Managers are the upper classes and workers, the lower classes. In the film, *Remains of the Day*, the butler, played by Antony Hopkins, is asked to give his opinions of international fiscal policies and he cannot. He is made to seem a fool when really it is just that he has been programmed differently from the “gentleman” questioning him. He understands perfectly SOP of service and that is where his expertise lies but service is looked down upon because it is lower down on the

hierarchy of social functions. TV shows, such as *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*, which clearly demonstrate this, are mistakenly understood as depicting a past era.

Though standardization is based on an understanding of equality, division of labour promotes inequality. In the modern day, though the movement between classes is much easier, the structure of class still obtains. Despite our insistence on equality, the work one does determines one’s position in the social and political hierarchy. A manager’s salary is not the same as a worker’s. There is no such thing as equality; human beings are individuals with different abilities and we pride ourselves on our capacity to rise above others. We are aided in this by processes of standardization which are based on sameness, but paradoxically require differentiation of human beings in order to facilitate their functioning.

In South Africa, in the wake of colonization came industrialization; colonists became managers; the colonized became workers. As managers and workers were of different races, prejudice became standardized along racial lines, and led to incipient separate development. Apartheid, a logical development from industrialized colonialism, formalized separate development. All institutions under apartheid adopted standard operating procedures based on racial difference and all people living in South Africa became locked into a system of race consciousness. Everyone, whether forced or not, operated in terms of racial perceptions. It was standard operating procedure. Racism is simply a different manifestation of the class system, i.e., the classification of work as hierarchical – managers being of the upper classes and workers of the lower classes. Racism obscures the reality of prejudice that arises from differentiation of function.

In *This puppet is no free speech hero*, an article about a spat between Conrad Koch and Steve Hofmeyr over racism, Sharmini Brookes writes:

“Hofmeyr’s comment* may have been offensive to some, but most people would not have taken it seriously. To me, it came across as a comment from an embittered Afrikaner about how, 25 years after Apartheid, South African society is still very much defined by race. In fact, Hofmeyr campaigned for the African National Congress (ANC) in the Nineties, alongside my mother, who was then the mayor of Midrand.” (Brookes, Spiked, 5 December 2014)

[*Hofmeyr’s comment: *Sorry to offend but in my books Blacks were the architects of Apartheid. Go Figure..*]

I sent Brookes the following email: “It’s too bad we can’t get beyond racism, which is only a symptom of a system that is founded on division. It’s the system that needs changing.”

And Brookes answered: “Yes but before the system can change, we need to change the way people think and that means the need for full and free debate without restrictions is fundamental.”

True full, free debate is needed. But we have to understand that the systems in which we operate programme our thinking. There can only be full and free debate if there is understanding that racism, classism, sexism reflect the hierarchical set-up of society. It is possible to eliminate racism and sexism but not classism. All our efforts are geared towards rising above the ordinary. We give awards to those

who prove they are superior to others. We may end racism, i.e. remove race consciousness from our endeavours, but we will never stop differentiating between people in terms of their competences and that is what gives rise to prejudice. Those who rise to the top expect, demand and are given acknowledgment for having proved themselves superior to the rest.

As long as people see racism simply as personal prejudice, they will continue to believe that it is just a matter of changing the attitudes of people. But racism and classism derive from being in community. As community translates into living and working together, it requires organization. Organization leads to the development of systems of administration with organisers taking on leadership roles – the development of hierarchies of functions. Even in the most basic communities, there is a chief and a council of elders. A family is a hierarchical structure. Schools are hierarchical structures and learners soon discover their places in the hierarchy through assessment procedures which place those who score highly at the top and those who do not at the bottom. In that way, schools contribute to class prejudice.

We may stop thinking of people in terms of race but we can never stop thinking of people in terms of their competence and positions in society. And those at the top will always look down on those below and those below will always aspire to getting to the top. The only way to be free of prejudice is to disband community and that is not possible.

Power Personified

an old adage
 from the pen of British historian
 Sir John Dalberg-Acton
 in a letter in 1887
 to Bishop Mandell Creighton:
 “Power tends to corrupt and
 absolute power corrupts absolutely.
 Great men are almost always bad men”
 echoing William Pitt, Prime Minister
 1770, House of Lords, Westminster
 “Unlimited power is apt to corrupt
 the minds of those who possess it.”

And, ever thereafter, power personified
 became the Devil in disguise,
 turning good men into hapless victims –
 the Doctor Faustus syndrome.

But power is not an entity
 just an abstract tool
 neutral till it's put to use:

in the hands of artists,
 to create
 visions of beauty that beguile the heart;

in the hands of musicians,
 to create
 heavenly harmonies that lift the soul;

in the hands of poets,
 to create
 universes of impassioned thought;

in the hands of scientists,
 to create
 understanding of existence and reality.

power has no power
 no independent will,
 simply a commodity;
 on human intent
 dependent

it is
 a knife in a murderer's hands,
 a rifle in a policeman's hands
 a grenade in a soldier's hands
 and in the hands of politicians,
 a magician's wand
 a bag of tricks
 deals under the table
 nothing clearly visible.

great men of integrity
surely there have been
though very few,
and very, very far between,
who demonstrated
that in their hands,
absolute power absolutely led
to clean constructive governance.

Sentencing Those Who Commit Crimes

I happened to catch the end of a show “The Final Verdict” on TV in which the judge and other law enforcement officials endorsed the idea that in sentencing a person found guilty of a crime, it was necessary to send a message to other individuals of the punishment in store for them for similar offences.

But making an example of someone could lead to sentencing that is unfairly harsh thus turning the convicted person into a scapegoat.

Sentencing of crime should not be concerned with its deterrence. The whole legal system, with its threat of punishment, is there to deter crime. As crimes are committed despite the knowledge that they will be punished, sentencing should concern itself solely with the circumstances of the crime and why a person takes the extraordinary step of flouting legal authority. It should not be concerned with sending out warnings to others. Equality before the law should mean the right to a fair and proper trial of the individual, just that and no more – no exploitation of an individual to send a message to society.

The person in the dock, no matter how reprehensible his actions, is by law allowed a fair trial. Sentencing, therefore, should be confined to the facts of the case. If the accused person is found guilty of a heinous crime, let him receive

the legally prescribed sentence appropriate to his actions. His punishment should not be determined by the effect it will have on other like-minded persons. In wanting to make an example of him, a judge may exceed the legal stipulation of what is appropriate punishment. That would be unjust and futile as well.

Those who deserve harsh sentences, are generally people who have no respect for the law and social conventions. They exploit every other individual's conformity to the law and to social conventions. They live with the belief that they can get away with crime. For the criminally-minded, the criminal justice system presents a challenge to be overcome. They dare to go boldly where no one is allowed; they undertake acts of criminal derring-do. Deterrents have no effect on them. But even criminal bravado should be judged solely in terms of the harm that it does.

Furthermore, punishment in itself is not an effective deterrent; people who are punished for crime often become recidivists. In prison, the ritual of expressing regret, asking for forgiveness and promising to refrain from illegal actions, serves no real purpose except to delude prison officials into believing that they signify rehabilitation. Rehabilitation to what? People freed from imprisonment return to circumstances similar to or worse than those that gave rise to their crimes. How can they not become recidivists?

It is necessary; therefore, to look at causes of crime; removal of causes would be more effective than harsher punishments. But dealing with causes is much more complicated than simply punishing crime. When people commit crimes, they are often motivated by impulse and

laws governing actions become irrelevant; immediate circumstances completely drown out all forms of social conditioning and make it difficult to take into consideration the consequences of actions.

As there can be no such thing as equality in society, there will always be crime. One of the reasons for abolishing capital punishment was that it did not deter criminal activity. For judges to declare that their sentences have a deterrent effect is naive. Justice needs to be clinically objective and an accused person must be seen as a person in his own right as an individual – not as a symbol. Most criminal acts arise out of difficult circumstances; we all experience difficult circumstances. We are all potential criminals.

Money

money is power
power is freedom
little money, little power,
little freedom
much money, much power,
much freedom

religion teaches the evils
of money, materialism, worldliness
to the poor and powerless
directing them to the life hereafter,
distracting them from the reality
of the here and now
cajoling them to find consolation
in poverty and slavery
their life here and now
“Blessed are the meek
for they shall inherit the earth”
“... shall possess the land
and delight themselves
in abundant prosperity.”

Inherit the earth?
Possess the land?
Squalid squatter camp?

Abundant prosperity?
malapropism surely;
abundant poverty
more likely.

amandla awethu,
power to the people –
pipe dream, fantasy
without the power
of money

CAPITALISM

I am not an economist; have never studied economics and have come to an independent understanding of capitalism based on what I see of the way in which we, as human beings, have organized our existence. Capitalism, being a human creation, is paradoxical; both positive and negative.

I once saw an item on TV which showed countless individual minnows being attacked by big fish. When the minnows organised themselves and banded together to take the form of a big fish to protect themselves, that to me expressed the essence of capitalism in its positive sense. Then in one of those wonderful nature documentaries, I saw dolphins rounding up hundreds of sardines, herding them together so that they could easily feed off them. That was capitalism in its negative sense. People who deride capitalism see only the negative, the abuse of power and the exploitation to which it leads.

The way I view it, when people put whatever power or resources they have together in order to ensure their well-being in the group, that is capitalism. In African townships in South Africa, people devised a simple form of capitalism known as “stokvel”. People club together, contributing a certain sum of money each month and the accumulated capital goes to the member whose turn it is to receive it. So each individual gets a chance to obtain what she otherwise would not be able to afford.

Capitalism came into being when we as human beings banded together to form communities to protect ourselves from predators and the vagaries of nature. Those animals that live in troops, have also adopted a very basic form of capitalism. They, like us, have banded together for the greater good of the group and the individual. In one episode of the BBC’s Planet Earth series, wild dogs are shown hunting impala. The dogs work together following a strategic plan to bring down their prey. When they have killed an impala, they call to each other so that every individual in the whole troop gets a share. That is capitalism in its ideal state – that is what communism was meant to be. Communism is really a form of capitalism; an idealistic version of capitalism in which power is equally shared by all, *amandla awethu*. The dogs got it right; human beings cannot; we are ambivalent – both selfish and altruistic. We are incapable of treating everyone equally. The wild dogs were able to share with all the members of their clan. Human beings, in general, are unable to do that; we are possessive and we discriminate.

The principle on which capitalism is based is “one for all and all for one.” It requires trust and cooperation and a true sharing of means. When power and greed enter the picture, capitalism is turned into corruption. Criticism of capitalism, therefore, is really criticism of corruption. Those who vilify capitalism do not vilify democracy even though both are based on the same principle – the pooling of resources in order to make possible benefits for each and every member of a group.

The election process is a clear example of the capitalistic principle. Each individual in marking a ballot paper, gives away her individual power to a candidate. The candidate

collects the power of all those who voted for him and with that accumulated power goes to work for the whole group. It is equivalent to banking – an obvious form of capitalism. The accumulation of capital is akin to the accumulation of power under democracy. We put our money in banks and our power in government; that makes possible subsidization of schemes to benefit both the group and the individual. All clubs, organisations, societies, schools, universities etc., are based on the principle of pooled resources. Capitalism is our way of life. We may call ourselves communist or socialist or liberal; all are simply variations on the theme of capitalism.

And capitalism, like democratic governance, is easily violated by those to whom we give power. Diatribes against capitalism are really vilifications of the overturning of the democratic-capitalistic principle of providing equitably for all.

Of Words

sounds
 breath of life,
 floating in air,
 blending together –
 words
 giving meaning
 to existence
 moving it forward

penned on paper,
 bound in books,
 words
 fire the heart
 fire the mind
 fire the spirit
 expand the brain
 in new worlds
 of understanding

from words more words
 self-generating
 creating
 language and discourse,
 ideologies
 sending

warriors to war
to fight for the right
each to his own words

from words more words
theories
demos kratos – people power,
democracy
spelled out in more words
a constitution
spelled out in promises –
words without deeds –
meaningless

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Community

As I write this, I am about six months shy of eighty and it has taken me a lifetime to work out what I believe. Being an atheist, I accept that human free will arises from our desire to solve the mystery of existence; not knowing stimulates investigation and discovery, turning life into an adventure. Since it is up to us to define, we have inordinate freedom to explore, create and give meaning to our existence on earth.

We created the stability and security of community as the launching pad that makes possible adventures into the unknown. Though community is not perfect – we have inequality, prejudice, crime and corruption – it is still the basis from which we are able to venture forth to explore. So I put my faith in the human community.

Religious beliefs are a metaphoric means of preserving the stability of community; people who sincerely practice their faiths are humane, loving individuals. Their belief in God makes this possible. Personally, I am not dependent on a metaphoric incentive; I know that I owe everything I have to human community. So I try my best to be a decent human being; I fail often and have continually to pick myself up. But that is the blessing of living in community; my failures don't doom me – being in community, I can pick myself up again and again and again. And I am a loner but I am not alone because I live in community and enjoy all the benefits of being in community.

Loneliness

A figment
of emotional imagination,
loneliness is blindness
looking into emptiness
hopelessness
helplessness;
a hole in the soul
filled with self pity,
the epitome
of victimhood,
reversion to babyhood
back into the womb
a shut sealed tomb.

Cease your cries;
open your eyes
to the world around you,
the many who surround you;
stop complaining,
stop your pleading;
turn to giving,
away from getting:
and you will find
all of humankind.

This is your reprieve –
‘Give and thou shalt receive’

Socialisation Processes and Identity

In community we undergo socialisation processes that lead to the development of our identities. I am because we are. Identity is not a product; it is a process, an ongoing process of negotiation between nature (our genetic disposition) and nurture (socialisation processes that are never ending).

Socialisation processes temper our inherent differences, conditioning us to sets of norms and values that lead to the development of shared identities. Uniforms and fashions are the most easily recognised indicators of shared identity.

The severest form of socialisation is induction into an army where an individual must give up her individual identity for a group identity. She wears a uniform, marches in step, obeys and lives a regimented life. She must not think for herself and is a virtual robot. It is a form of dehumanisation necessary to make it possible for her to kill.

Normal socialisation is meant to have the opposite effect: the humanising of the individual for the protection and enhancement of life. That means learning behaviours that encourage co-operation and communication and suppressing behaviours that inhibit interaction. Each individual goes through many processes of socialisation in a variety of institutions: the family, school, workplace, clubs, etc. Each institution equips her with a different set of norms, values and skills, that allow her to fit in and work harmoniously with colleagues.

Processes of socialization (educational, religious, political, social, economic) are the means of toning down

disparity by requiring adherence to conventions that make co-operation possible. Each new association that we make, demands conformity to a new shared identity that facilitates communication in the new environment. The individual, therefore, becomes the aggregate of many shared identities as she goes through socialisation processes in different institutions and fields e.g. African-Zulu-teacher-IFP member-wife-mother-church member-university student-sports organiser, etc. The formation of identity, therefore, is an unending process and never devolves into a finite product. We exist in an expanding universe and likewise have endless possibilities of being through all the relationships we develop in our lives. In the words of a character in Terry Pratchett's, *Thief of Time*, "Humans weren't individuals, they were, each one, a committee."

Though socialisation processes attempt to reduce individuality in order to produce the uniformity that makes for compatibility and facilitates communication, individual responses to socialisation processes are not identical; inherent differences determine what individuals take from these processes. Inherent differences stem from the original being, the unprocessed self – the raw material that society works on. This is a description in *Thief of Time*, of the elemental being and the struggle to control it. (Remember: the individual is a committee)

Some of the other members of the committee were dark and red and entirely uncivilized. They had joined the brain before civilization; some of them had got aboard even before humanity. And the bit that did the joined-up thinking had to fight, in the darkness of the brain, to get the casting vote!

Natural impulses determine the ways in which we respond to socialisation processes. The natural being does not submit passively to social conditioning. We call children who don't conform 'naughty', adults who don't conform, 'deviant'. Resistance to social norms that arises from perceptions of violations of our true natures, allows us to retain something of our native uniqueness and protects us from robotic conformity.

But our uniqueness is not only the result of our natural dispositions; it is also a configuration of all the socialization processes that we go through. As we belong to many different groups, we accumulate many different sets of norms and values. Each individual, therefore, combines a diversity of perspectives which is unique to herself (each individual is a committee). Consequently, we are all different from one another, not only as a result of natural predispositions, but also through entry into many different forms of socialisation in work, social, recreation and family environments.

The uniqueness that gives us our identity is, therefore, both natural as well as socially cultivated. The natural and the social are inseparable. They work together to produce an individual identity made up of multiple similarities to and differences from other people.

Shared Identity and Equality

Shared identity indicates relationship to others – membership of a group. The most obvious shared identity is that of citizen, based on a common factor, the country of one's birth. Being a political identity, citizenship is impersonal and simply designates one as a member of a particular nation.

To be recognised as a citizen is essential to democracy. It guarantees equality in terms of human rights and justice and commits one to the acceptance of the rule of law.

Equality in this context means the neutralization of the individual, i.e., the stripping down of all individual differences: race, creed, colour etc. Every individual, reduced only to the characteristics common to all human beings, is then perceived as identical to every other individual. This neutralisation of the individual under the law is necessary to ensure democratic rights: 1. equality of opportunity, i.e. no discrimination on the basis of difference; and 2. equality before the law i.e. the pledge of fair treatment.

Neutralisation ensures unbiased consideration of the individual and allows her to be judged only with regard to whether she has broken the law. In a court case, the Prosecution represents society's requirement of conformity to the law and evaluates her actions in terms of her neutral identity as citizen. The Defence defends her rights as an individual, presents the uniqueness of her circumstances and challenges the shortcomings of laid down principles that require conformity but cannot cater for the unforeseen, for extenuating circumstances.

Rules, regulations, laws that we devise to protect the individual, depend on our understanding of what it means to be humane. As society is continuously evolving, what appears to be just today, may prove to be unjust tomorrow. Predilection and prejudice are constantly being exposed as we learn to accept wider understandings of human complexity. The law, therefore, which functions to preserve society, has to see its function not as fixed but evolving; has to accept change as essential to dispensing justice. Law

books and constitutions do not represent absolute truth, only what seems absolute in the moment. They are simply historical markers of the meaning of justice at any given time. Being part of the expanding processes of existence, justice cannot remain fixed; it has to change to accommodate the ever evolving human being.

As members of communities and organizations, we are regarded as basically the same (neutralization – the requirement for equal treatment) and are expected to adopt common norms and values. But the degree to which we conform varies with each member, so we remain individuals even in conformity.

Working together, however, we tend to develop common characteristics that emanate from shared environment, function and common purpose. They give rise to the development of similar thought, speech and behaviour patterns that promote compatibility and facilitate communication. Common characteristics have a practical value in providing a quick estimate of an individual, necessary especially in formal and official interactions.

But perception of common characteristics of members of a group can lead to stereotyping. This is most commonly seen with reference to racial groupings; outsiders usually see only the shared personality and from that derive fixed characteristics, often negative, for a racial group, and reduces its members to stereotypes that lead to prejudice and injustice. Under apartheid, race was made a component of citizenship; the individual, therefore, was not neutralized in terms of difference. Justice, therefore, could not be fair as those who appeared before the law, were not neutralized individuals but racial stereotypes.

Where race is not configured into the requirements for citizenship, people generally identify themselves in terms of nationality: Nigerian, Malawian, Chinese, American, British, etc., a neutralization of the individual. When racism enters the picture, we adopt terms such as African-American that highlight the failure to recognise a particular group as integral to a particular society. Such a designation though it contradicts the requirement of neutrality which is necessary for equality, is in its contradiction a demand for equality. It exposes tacit prejudice experienced by the group.

In Apartheid South Africa, where citizenship was exclusive, people were identified in terms of race and colour – European/White, Coloured/Brown, Indian/Brown and African/Black. In the new South Africa, with its legacy of apartheid, some of these designations still obtain: in particular, White, Black, Afrikaner and Indian. The continued reference to race/colour/ethnicity to identify people post-1994 is an indication that we are not yet free of race consciousness; that we do not yet fully embrace the equality necessary for justice. To be called Indian, for example, denies a South African of Indian origin, complete incorporation into the society.

Duality of Identity

It is not possible to isolate conformity from disparity, they work together in the creation of identity. The individual is part of the group, and the group is made up of individuals. "I am because we are," simultaneously the same and different. Our shared values make us the same. Our responses to our shared values make us different. Differences allow us to be individuals; sameness gives us group identity. When we say we

have something in common with someone else, it is recognition of a shared identity.

The dual nature of our identities, shared and individual, complicates our lives. Most romantic literature is based on this duality. Though lovers are besotted with one another as individuals, the heroine cannot marry the hero because their group identities do not match. She is a Capulet, he a Montague and they are plunged into a tortuous process in which as individuals they try to overcome their group identities. If they succeed it usually means estrangement from the group – isolation, banishment, death.

Group identities, because they are shared, are stronger and tend to subordinate the individual identity. Husbands and wives, engaged in different work environments, develop different shared identities and compatibilities with colleagues that may exceed compatibility with their marriage partners.

Strong affiliation to a group identity often leads to intolerance of difference. Prejudice and partisanship then become the norm and can lead to mindless violence; to fanaticism. When group identities become too strong, chauvinistic, they result in conflicts and wars: Catholics vs. Protestants, Palestinians vs. Jews, Communists vs. Capitalists, Liberals vs. Conservatives, ANC vs. DA.

Human existence is paradoxical; to make meaning, we search continuously for fixity in ever changing circumstances. We as continuously try to stop the world as it continuously keeps rotating and revolving in an expanding universe. Community and bureaucracy are means we have created to stop the world. They reduce individuals to quantifiable objects, to numbers processed along assembly lines

of rules, regulations and laws. They make paramount the processes of interaction (standard operating procedures). And regulation, the god to whom the individual must pay homage, fixes identity in the same way that fanatics do.

But the human being, constantly pushing back the boundaries of what it means to be human, is in synch with the universe. His evolution cannot be stopped. It arises from the paradoxical nature of his being.

Liberty

Liberty ! Freedom!
Words to sing and shout
and drive the revolution
against oppression.

But freedom is not free.
Tied
to responsibility,
it is the guarantee
of safety in community.

Freedom is in the bond.
I am because we are
without you, I am not
without me, you are not
together we are free to be
individually.

And Freedom,
 from fanaticism
 from corruption,
 from oppression,
 is commitment
 to the bond
 that curbs and controls
 to keep us whole,
 free from all our fears.

But freedom from fear
 the only true liberty,
 has no real guarantee.

“RUSHDIE’S BITCH”

I decided to write this essay after an article appeared in the *Sunday Times* of 22 March 2015 in which an attack on Zainub Priya Dala is described by reporter Matthew Savides.

The attack happened a day after she had praised British author Salman Rushdie’s writing style at a book festival.” (The Time of the Writer Conference, Durban March 2015)

Dala said she was driving to her beautician in Overport when she noticed that she was being followed by a white car, with three occupants. “It was trying to run me off the road.”

She was eventually forced off the road at a makeshift taxi rank, and the car pulled up alongside her.

“My window was open, because it was hot. One man got out from the passenger side and came to my window, held a knife to my throat and called me ‘Rushdie’s bitch’, and hit me with a brick.”

“He then got back in the car and they drove away.”

...

Time of the Writer project manager Tiny Mungwe said at a festival event of Friday night

that after Dala mentioned Rushdie, ‘a group of teachers and learners stood up and left the forum. Nothing was said, but the conclusion is that these groups were offended.’”

In about 1989, the year of the fatwa against Rushdie, I wrote the following poem.

It went on my website, which I acquired in 2008.

*Solomon the bold
bullets
knives
arrowheads of anger
unleashed by unreasoning
blind fanaticism
spawned in the bowel
for eons after the fall
speed
on the frequency of your heartbeat
to annihilate you
towering over satan
of the satanic verses.
Rumpelstiltskin,
in a white beard and a tall hat
stamps his little foot
against a Man
who boldly stands
where Lucifer once stood
in the light of truth.*

The poem received the following comment in 2012.

0 #1 Faizal 2012-01-23 13:19

Typical of your attitude....i only needed to look at one more bit of your “crap” writing and confirm what i had commented on in “The Arab World in Turmoil.” A man filled with hatred!

[This is his comment on the “The Arab World in Turmoil.”]

Faizal 2012-01-23 13:07

Although your article is indicative of the current situation in South Africa and other countries, your heading and reference is only made to “The Arab World In Turmoil”. You write well, but with blinkers on! Take into consideration the excellent governance and corrupt free India before focusing on its neighbour, Pakistan. Being so well informed about the ARAB world and not reflecting on the American and European influences there is clearly indicative of your personal view and dislike of the ARAB world rather than based on fact. Articles of a prejudicial nature such as this one clearly reflects your inability to write objectively. To an extent I would say that your site propagates propaganda. For your introspection and admission of your, to put it mildly, “Hatred of the Arab World.”

[There is no such admission in my article.]

Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* was published in 1988. The fatwa was announced in 1989. It is now 2015 – about twenty-five years later. Rushdie’s book has had no effect on the practice of the religion so why continue the vendetta? But people, including school children who are too young to

be aware of the furore caused by *Satanic Verses*, are taught to condemn Rushdie.

While Rushdie is/was made to fear for his life, the Monty Python company's send up of the Christ story in *The Life of Bryan* and their other parodies of life, have made them celebrities. Being a fan of both Rushdie and Monty Python, I find it necessary to investigate the meaning of the difference in treatment of men who enjoy parodying life. And of course, I am not objective; I don't know anyone who is. We are all preconditioned by our circumstances to make judgments that reflect our understanding of the world.

So from the start I freely admit that I do not approve of fanaticism. As human beings, we have the ability to reason. It is an ability I prize, and through it, I search for objectivity. Being a fallible human being, I consider it a betrayal of being human to condemn other human beings simply because I do not understand their points of view. Such condemnation is fanatical. A fanatic is one who upholds only one point of view—his own.

Fanaticism is always accompanied by violence – in language, as in the comments from my website or physical violence as in the case of the Durban author, Zainub Priya Dala. Violence proceeds from the fanatic's inability to tolerate difference of opinion. This intolerance emanates from the fanatic's inability to engage in rational argument. Being ruled by emotion (in the first comment above, the writer calls himself "A man filled with hatred!"), the fanatic's modus operandi is to attack. His affiliation to his point of view being absolute, he cannot absorb any difference in understanding. He condemns difference out of hand and can only deal with it violently.

The fanatic's modus operandi is based on fear – the fear of infection, fear of being absorbed into a new way of seeing and thinking. It is an indication that one's own faith in one's belief is not absolute; it is an indication of self-doubt. The fear of losing the stability of his conviction does not allow the fanatic to entertain a different point of view. His inordinate fear leads to violence in speech and action. The men who attacked Dala, were afraid of her; afraid that she would change their minds, afraid that she would reveal their prejudice to them. And their fear filled them with a hatred that manifested itself in violence. In apartheid South Africa, black people were feared so they were subjected to tremendous violence. Fear is a very basic instinct. In order to be civilized, one has to conquer one's fears.

Some may see the men who attacked Dala, as men filled with anger at the betrayal of their faith; I see their actions as fuelled only by fear. If they had real faith, they would have laughed at Dala and Rushdie and not considered them a threat. The fact that they wanted to harm Dala, is a clear indication that they don't believe their faith is infallible; they actually believe that Dala or Rushdie can do harm to a faith that has been growing and developing for centuries. They do not believe their religion is strong enough to withstand Rushdie's sense of humour.

Fanatics do more harm to their faith than a Dala or Rushdie ever could. I actually feel sorry for them. How awful it must be to have so little faith in the power of their religion. But in fact, the whole situation has nothing to do with religion. It has everything to do with the attackers' feelings of insecurity. They need affirmation of their faith from others to strengthen their own beliefs.

People confident of their faith feel no threat when others express different attitudes and understandings. While Dala and Rushdie have to fear for their lives, the Monty Python company lives and prospers in England. *The Life of Bryan* is out on DVD for anyone to purchase. There is no fear that *The Life of Bryan* is a threat to the church and Christianity. For people in England, it is a send-up of the Christ story and they can laugh with it or tolerate it because they are firm in their beliefs.

In fact, *The Life of Bryan* provides relief from the solemnity of ritual and worship and actually reinforces people's appreciation of their faith. In *The Life of Bryan*, they can encounter in humour whatever doubts they have and working through the film's absurdities, discover for themselves their own understanding of their faith. They don't get angry and curse, they laugh instead and begin to think more deeply about their faith; no one takes to heart the lampooning of holy cows.

Salman Rushdie, doing a similar thing with *Satanic Verses*, infuriates those less secure in their culture. Locked into absolutes, they are not able to understand Rushdie, who has embraced the relativity of truth. Like Giordano Bruno, who believed in the infinity of the universe – as we do in modern times, Rushdie is being persecuted for not being a reductionist, as all fanatics are.

As human beings we create absolute truths to give our existence stability, but our absolute truths are only absolute until a Copernicus or an Einstein comes along. Then we find ourselves in a new understanding of reality. But there are still people in the world too afraid to accept the infinite

variety of creation.

Fanatics are afraid of change and their fear makes them violent. Their whole endeavour is to stop change and by stopping change, stop progress. Their fear allows them to justify anonymous attacks on the unsuspecting. Three men pursuing a woman alone in her car, then smashing her face with a brick and disappearing without a trace, demonstrate their inability to reason.

It is sad to think that in a world in which scientists are able to demonstrate that we live in an expanding universe, there are those who still have only a primitive understanding of human existence. How is it that they have been left behind? With all the means of education at our disposal in the modern world, how is it that there are still those capable of such mindless acts.

It makes one see religion as reactionary.

Self-esteem

peace is
 happiness is
 belief
 in oneself
 as is
 that opens one
 to see
 to hear
 to accept
 oneself in an other
 another in oneself
 common in humanity
 shining through diversity
 of faith, custom, culture.

without belief
 in oneself
 as is
 one and all are other,
 and diversity divides,
 dissolving common humanity
 in alienating inhumanity

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 116 AND UBUNTU

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove:
 O no! It is an ever-fixèd mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

For most ordinary people like me, this is Shakespeare's declaration that true love withstands all changes in circumstances – those brought about by serious problems (tempests) or the passing of time and aging – and endures for all eternity. That such love never changes is for Shakespeare, a fact as true as the fact that he has written this sonnet.

For academics and scholarly experts, it is the nature of the love referred to that presents a problem. Is it passionate or platonic love?

Shakespeare's declaration of faith is in "the marriage of true minds." He sees such love as a constant in volatile human existence. Those of us who have watched Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* can see that Shakespeare's understanding is conditioned by the accepted view in his day of a fixed universe with the Earth at its centre. Such a concept gave rise to the propagation of absolute truths. Kepler, Copernicus and Galileo had begun to challenge this view and now in the 21st century, prompted by Darwin, Einstein and others, we have come to accept that we live in an expanding universe in which everything is moving and evolving. That movement, like the earth's rotation on its axis and its revolution around the sun is imperceptible and is only apparent to most of us in the rising and setting of the sun and the change of seasons.

My small understanding of an expanding universe has helped me to a new interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnet. The poem presents the continuous movement of change – circumstances change, bodies change, hours and weeks pass. In the face of these inexorable forces, "the marriage of true minds" remains unchanging. Shakespeare posits it as an absolute truth. And the poem's popularity reveals it as a desirable absolute.

We, however, live in times in which absolute truths are absolute only in the moment. Truth has become relative. More rapidly than in the past, we are being confronted with our own fallibility and truths, once taken-for-granted, must continually make way for new, improved understandings in

our pursuit of perfection. (We see this in everyday things like new car designs and improved cell phone communication.) All our institutions are based on truths that are absolutes but only in the moment. And we are constantly in search of new absolutes. But we are reluctant to "admit impediments" to "the marriage of true minds." We want Shakespeare's understanding to be absolute because we have idealized passionate love.

However, in Shakespeare's words, "the marriage of true minds" we do not find an expression of passionate physical and emotional fulfilment, but a marriage of understanding. The words "true minds" – 'true' meaning complete agreement, 'minds' meaning thoughts, attitudes, spirit, dreams, wishes, values, ambitions – turn love into total compatibility at an intellectual level. Such compatibility even absorbs what we might call 'infidelity' – "tempests" and "wandering barks." "True minds" are not subject to the dictates of convention; they transcend convention. Minds can be true as they do not claim possession and exclusivity in the way physical passion does. Marriages of the mind are of minds in accord and not subject to divorce; they occur between siblings, friends, colleagues, with teachers, mentors, coaches. They also occur between people who never meet. If you enter into Shakespeare's intellectual world and you learn to love him, it is a love that endures; and even if it seems one-sided, it is not. All artists, through their work, throw their arms wide open to embrace you

It is the workplace that often gives rise to the conscious marriage of minds. Working together to create processes and products is exciting, exhilarating; it arouses the passions and the pragmatic gives way to euphoria. If you watch the DVD, *Wagner's Dream*, you see people working

and creating together. Robert Lepage and his Ex Machina team clearly demonstrate the excitement and joy of working together as they complement one another in creating the stage set for *Der Ring des Niebelungen*. Inspired by Wagner's music, they build a set capable of flowing with the movements of Wagner's musical themes. And the presentation of the drama becomes a visual and auditory demonstration of the marriage of true minds – Wagner's and Lepage's. When people working together find themselves supplementing one other's thoughts, they become excited about their connection and that may lead to physical consummation, but it is the intellectual connection that is "the ever fixed mark" that sustains the relationship.

Love is both passionate and pragmatic. Pragmatic love is what sustains families and communities. It is the glue that holds them together. In South Africa, it is called Ubuntu. It is taken-for-granted love, inherent in socialization and reinforced by religion: "love thy neighbour," "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Despite our capriciousness, we all, unconsciously for the most part, subscribe to it. It is what motivates good Samaritans. We are all, in our tremendous variety, people through other people. And the unconscious love that binds us, abides in our commitment to community, and involuntarily encompasses all other human beings. It is not passion; it is pragmatic; it is necessity. It is the kind of love that keeps families together. It is an ever fixed mark – not generally recognised as it is not dramatic like passionate love that leads to physical consummation.

In the family, the physical passion which gave it form, is transformed by the need to ensure the welfare of all its members and love becomes pragmatic, a taken-for-grant-

ed form of love that endures. It is an unconscious marriage of minds.

All societies, with their wedding rituals, condition us to seeing marriage as the fulfilment of passionate love when marriage really serves a pragmatic end. Marriage came about in order to regulate passion and create families to ensure the survival of the species. To 'regulate' means to curb so natural passion is brought under control and leads to unnatural but civilized conventions such as being faithful; such as dictates against adultery, incest, prostitution, "illegitimate" children. Convention ushers us into the idea of the grand passion as a one-time occurrence with a single partner, heterosexual, of the same culture, race, religion, that leads to marriage 'til death do us part.' Many fairy tales end at the prospect of the consummation of love; they reinforce such notions of controlled passion in declarations of living happily ever after. Fairy tales dare not venture beyond the particular moment of passion.

Passionate love brought under control in community and made to conform to the need for stability and cohesion, becomes pragmatic. But passion is the key to freedom. Despite attempts to restrict it, it defies all regulation – fornication and adultery are commonplace. And in art, people like Shakespeare, Wagner and others, including even Mills and Boon writers, present over and over, lovers whose passion flies in the face of convention. Perhaps that is what makes passionate love so exciting. Lions mating simply do what comes naturally; like eating or defecating. But human restrictions have turned passion into an art. And art is the striving for freedom. Freedom is not some ideal – it is freedom from human restraint. All children experience it

when the bell rings and school is over. It is what Wotan longs for in Wagner's Ring Cycle.

As homosexuals and single people are not committed to procreation, they are looked upon as aberrations because they do not conform. But is gay love, which is confined to the bond between lovers, entirely passionate because it does not have the pragmatic end of preserving the species? Passion happens in bursts, is fulfilled in consummation, and is not sustainable twenty-four hours a day – but gay couples do live in sustained relationships. Is it an unconscious response to society's conditioning of individuals for marriage? Or does it mean that relationships are sustained by more than passion? Is that what Shakespeare means by the marriage of true minds – that compatibility accompanies sex in a sustained relationship?

In Wagner's *Die Walküre*, the first scene is a scene of passionate love. Siegmund and Sieglinde fall in love at first sight and are swept away, like Romeo and Juliet, by passion and the need to become one. How could theirs be a marriage of true minds? What can lovers know of each other at first sight? But Siegmund and Sieglinde are twins; they know each other instinctively – each one sees him/herself in the other.

Does that mean that people fall in love because they see themselves in the beloved? Is passionate love finding oneself in the other? Is it a form of narcissism? Is that what compatibility means? Not having to contend with the otherness of another? Or is it the excitement of finding oneself in the otherness of the other – extensions of oneself, new dimensions of self in the other?

Why do people divorce? Is it because they are unable to extend themselves through the otherness of the other? The marriage of true minds and physical consummation – are they different forms of love, different stages of love or a necessary blending of passion, difference and compatibility for sustainability?

Shakespeare's sonnet brings together passion, difference and compatibility and in their fusion, finds, what we all want, a love that lasts forever – the marriage of true minds.

Manumission

pursuit
 of freedom
 from bondage
 in the bond
 to boldness
 recklessness
 self-indulgence
 licentiousness
 freedom
 from ubuntu
 from being
 human

RICHARD WAGNER: DER RING DES NIEBELUNGEN

Tom Swart and Lionel Berman, two friends who enrich my life in every encounter, always setting me on a new learning curve, shared with me (March, 2015) their DVDs of *Der Ring des Niebelungen* staged at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York 2010 – 2011. I was ready for it. Having lived for the last twenty-one years in what the world calls democracy, I have come to recognize, with the aid of Milan Kundera, the fantasies we weave about existence in order to hide our feelings of insecurity. I used to be a naive romantic; I actually believed that democracy meant power to the people.

New Old Way

Before '94
 I believed
 even became an activist
 stood up to resist
 the racist rule of law;
 marching in the mass
 full of fight and fearless
 fists up, spirits high
 Viva the revolution!
 Viva!

Yes, I believed
 and knew without a doubt
 the meaning of democracy:
 amandla awethu, liberty
 equality, fraternity,
 the Freedom Charter,
 the people shall govern

I knew without a doubt
 that new, enlightened leaders,
 sprung from the soil of oppression
 would startle the whole world
 with true democracy, genuine
 liberty, equality, fraternity

After '94
 I learned
 it was all a game
 the game of chess
 transformed
 no longer as before –
 all white on one side
 all black on the other;
 with the new dispensation
 no group area separation
 black and white together

now kings, queens, bishops
 rooks and knights
 black and white
 all together
 on one side
 face all the pawns
 black and white
 all together
 on the opposite side:

new teams, old rules
 kings, queens, bishops,
 send knights from rooks
 to fire on pawns
 marching en masse
 full of fight, and fearless
 fists up, spirits high
 Viva the revolution!
 Viva!

Now aware of the paradoxical nature of human existence and the relativity of human truth, I think I no longer have unrealistic expectations of myself and, hopefully, of others.

In *Der Ring*, I found extensive exposition of the paradox of being; in particular in the conflicted character of Wotan. Despite his designation as a god, Wotan's search is the human search for secure existence in an expanding universe of relative truth.

WOTAN

Wotan is caught up in the very human dilemma of free will versus duty and the quest for authentic right action independent of social conditioning. It is the search for absolute truth. The sword, Nothung (meaning Born of Need), represents his desire to find this truth. It is a paradoxical quest. As a god, he represents the absolute so he is on a quest to discover his own authenticity. (Only an atheist would put him on such a quest.) I was eager to see how Wotan would resolve his dilemma. He does not. There is no solution; he and Valhalla are destroyed. Authentic action, being authentic (not the product of socialization) is beyond his control and, as represented in Siegfried, is his nemesis. When Siegfried breaks Wotan's spear, the symbol of the power of the divine, i.e. absolute truth, he declares Wotan's irrelevance.

The need for absolutes is a human need; it is the way we anchor our lives in an uncertain existence. It gave rise to the concept of god. Consequently, it is the divine that does not have independent or concrete existence. Gods are anthropomorphic creations, i.e., made in the human image. Wotan, therefore, cannot avoid human ambivalence. His desire for freedom from convention is human, and represents the conflict in every human between social obligation and individual desire. It is quite ironic that Wotan, the first among the gods, originator of the laws that control social behaviour, is the only one among the gods who finds them a burden. As a divided soul, he is vulnerable and his weakness is the real threat to Valhalla.

Ambivalence is inherently human and its exclusion from divinity is what makes gods symbols of perfection and

gives them power. But Wotan is ambivalent. He finds the strictures of law stultifying and declares himself, 'the least free of all beings.' He seeks freedom in the world, a kind of red-light district to him, where he can indulge his appetites. He enters the human sphere to experience love, wins Erda, the Earth goddess, and fathers the Valkyries, the warrior goddesses. He then becomes Wälse and fathers human twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde.

In the human world, he is a libertine and does not adhere to principle. He is dishonest in his dealings with the giants, Fasolt and Fafner, and is forced, mainly by Fricka, his goddess wife, to behave with integrity. That is when he hears of Alberich and the ring he has forged from the Rhine gold. In Alberich, whose discovery of his power as a human being (as represented by the ring) he sees the great threat to the existence of the gods and Valhalla. Alberich's ring represents Alberich's belief in himself, in human endeavour, in the validity of human life. His affirmation of independent human existence and power, proclaims the reality of life on earth and human responsibility for human destiny.

Wotan sees this as the threat of extinction of the gods and Valhalla. As supernatural existence is shored up by human faith in predestination, it gives Valhalla reality and substance and reduces human endeavour to symbolic action that has no real meaning in itself. Human life simply becomes the means to earn points for entry into the hereafter.

Conversely, human affirmation of human power gives reality to worldly existence and reduces supernatural power to the abstract and symbolic. Human self-determination deprives the supernatural of its *raison d'être*. Alberich's assumption of power is not a threat of usurpation, it is the

threat of dematerialization of the supernatural. And Wotan is guilty of contributing to it by his own deep-seated longing to be human. As the survival of Valhalla and the gods is at stake, Wotan has to gain possession of the ring.

Having been forced to live up to his responsibility as upholder of the law, Wotan needs a surrogate, a human hero, who, being human is able to disregard the law and win back the ring for him. Intent on regaining the ring, Wotan does not realize that in calling for one who repudiates the law, he is calling for the repudiation of himself. Someone who breaks the law to preserve Valhalla, will destroy Valhalla which is the law. Furthermore, in wanting someone who acts independently of his will, he is actually calling for a self-determined human being. That is completely contrary to his mission which is to stifle human self-determination.

Caught in a web of contradictions, Wotan, as Wälse, has brought up his son, Siegmund, to be fearless in defying convention. Wotan, therefore, believes that Siegmund is independent of him and is the hero who will bring back the magic ring and save Valhalla and the gods from extinction. But Siegmund, the unconventional, not knowing what Wotan has in mind for him, becomes involved in the conflict between idealism and reality on a human level. He falls in love with his twin sister, Sieglinde, and flouts marriage customs. It is a practical demonstration of his ability to act independently of Wotan's will and in doing so, determining his own way – and that has nothing to do with what Wotan wants of him. Furthermore, fulfilling his own wishes, Siegmund's actions, being self-determined, are a negation of Wotan's *raison d'être*.

Wotan is forced to repudiate Siegmund. Though he loves Siegmund, he must destroy him. He confides his anguish to Brünnhilde and his despair of finding:

... one [who] may dare what to me is denied:
a hero never helped by my counsel,
to me unknown and free from my grace,
unaware, forced by his need, without command,
with his own right arm,
doeth the deed that I must shun,

the deed my tongue ne'er told,
though yet my deepest desire.
He, at war with the god, for me fighteth,
the friendliest foe. O, how shall I find
or shape me the free one, by me ne'er shielded,
in his firm defiance the dearest to me?
How fashion the Other who, not through me,
but from his will for my ends shall work?
O, godhead's distress! Soarest disgrace!
In loathing find I ever myself
in all my hand has created;
the Other whom I have longed for,
that Other I ne'er shall find:
himself must the free one create him;
my hand nought shapeth but slaves.

He is blind to the fact that he is calling for his own doom in the words, "himself must the free one create him". It is unwitting endorsement of human self-determination and as such, a threat to his existence.

In confiding in Brünnhilde, he plants his need for a great hero in her, and she declares that she will protect Siegmund. He absolutely forbids that and promises a dreadful punishment

if she does. Brünnhilde, as blind as Wotan, does not see that Siegmund's unconventionality is really a repudiation of Wotan, Valhalla and immortal existence. Siegmund himself is unconscious of this.

Though Brünnhilde is intimidated by Wotan and does not agree with him, she plans to obey him. But when she sees how much Siegmund and Sieglinde love each other; when Siegmund chooses Sieglinde over the honour and glory of becoming a hero in Valhalla, she is moved and despite Wotan's threats, decides to protect him. In defying Wotan, hers is authentic action and she becomes that Other that he longs for. But Wotan sees her defiance not as independent action, but as betrayal. He does not want betrayal; he wants authentic action -- not realising that they are one and the same – both ignore convention and are a threat to him, to Valhalla. He also does not regard Brünnhilde's actions as authentic – as arising out of her own perception; he sees them as arising from his desire, so she cannot be that Other for whom he longs.

Though Brünnhilde disobeys Wotan, she feels justified in helping the Wälsungs, not only because she believes it is what Wotan really wants but also because she believes that Sieglinde, who is pregnant, will give birth to the greatest of all heroes, Siegfried, the Other, that Wotan desires:

the Other whom I have longed for, that Other I ne'er
shall find: himself must the free one create him;

Wotan looks past Brünnhilde as the Other, the hero independent of his will, because as she says, "Who am I, if not your will?" As such she is attuned to that aspect of him

that agonises at having to uphold the law even when it cannot encompass the full humanity of those it constrains. Being privy to his innermost feelings, to his divided will, makes Brünnhilde, one with Wotan; his dilemma becomes hers and sharing his ambivalence – the split in Wotan's awareness creates the split in her awareness – she can either obey his command or obey his desire. And so, having choice, she becomes independent of him. She does not realize this; and when she disobeys his command and fulfils his desire, she believes she is acting for him, not for herself.

But Wotan distances himself from her choice and punishes her for her presumption. He cannot see that her act of defiance is a response to his desire not his will. He does not differentiate between his desire and his will even though they are in opposition. His desire being independent of his will, in fulfilling his desire, Brünnhilde acts independently of his will and hers is as authentic an action as is possible. A totally authentic action would be totally independent of Wotan's need. Without a connection to him, a hero's action would be arbitrary; Siegmund has already shown this and as Wotan will discover, so will Siegfried. Brünnhilde is the only one who can act independently of him and still do what he wishes.

What Brünnhilde demonstrates is that one who experiences fear and acts despite it as she has, is one who is truly courageous. And as she acts with understanding of Wotan's need, is a more effective instrument in fulfilling it. Though she will see the great hero for whom Wotan longs in Siegfried, Siegfried has no understanding of Wotan's need. Being more independent than his father, Siegmund, Siegfried has total free will and does only what he himself perceives is necessary – and that has nothing to do with Wotan.

ALBERICH

The Ring cycle is called *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Having watched it several times in succession, I came to the conclusion that the title means Alberich's Ring. Of his own ingenuity, Alberich creates a ring that gives him control over all the Nibelungen.

The ring is the symbol of human power, i.e., human acceptance of human reality and control of human destiny – it makes gods irrelevant. Human assertion of independent reality gives validity to human existence and repudiates the belief that this world is merely preparation for the next. In his desire for love, and his ventures into the human sphere, Wotan himself, involuntarily affirms independent human existence and worldly reality. He is uncomfortable as a god; he wants the reality, the vitality of human life. When, at the end of the cycle, the ring is returned to the river, it is back where it belongs – in the real world. And Brünnhilde, who rejoices in her transformation into a human being, is the one to return it to the Rhine.

Though Alberich is presented as a negative character in the cycle, he, paradoxically, represents the acceptance of existential human reality, the validity of worldly existence. He is the independent human being who creates and controls his own destiny. Alberich, not the gods, is the author of his existence. As such he represents human freedom and the positive side of capitalism. His accumulation of money and power, which turns him into an exploiter and abuser of human beings, is the negative side of capitalism. It is the paradox of being human – a necessary condition for human progress.

SIEGFRIED

I watched *Siegfried*, (30 March 2015), the third drama in Wagner's tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung* [Alberich's Ring.]). I had watched *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyries*), the day before. So my expectations of *Siegfried* were of the stereotypical noble hero slaying the dragon, freeing the sleeping beauty with a kiss and riding off into the sunset with his prize.

romance
not reality
hero
not anti-hero
nobility
to dazzle the eyes
and consistency,
consistency,
consistency,
cause and effect
Jekyll not Hyde
the art of fiction
the fiction of art

After witnessing the power of the self-asserted woman in Brünnhilde (*Brun*—armour, *hild*-battle) in *Die Walküre*, I was preparing myself for disappointment in *Siegfried*. At the end of *Die Walküre*, Brünnhilde is disempowered – reduced to an effete fairy tale princess and condemned to the conventional housekeeping role of women. I expected to see a helpless Brünnhilde being rescued by a noble knight, falling into his arms and forever after to be known only as Mrs. To my delight,

my expectations were almost completely dashed. I had underestimated Wagner; he wasn't Wotan and the drama, Siegfried, was a wonderful surprise – a complete overthrow of convention.

The character, *Siegfried*, is not the stereotypical indomitable, invincible, noble hero. He is not Sir Galahad or James Bond. He is a rebellious teenager, rude, impertinent and a know-it-all. He is completely contemptuous of Mime, the gnome, who took him and his mother in and when she died, brought up the boy. Though Siegfried has grown up under Mime's care, he finds Mime repugnant, cannot relate to him and cannot learn anything from him. What he learns, he learns from exploring the forests and familiarising himself with everything in nature. He is, in a sense, a feral being. His first entrance on stage is with a bear on a leash; it illustrates that he, unsocialized, has no understanding of fear or danger.

We naturally assume that fear is a basic human instinct; not something to be acquired through socialization. As Siegfried has not had a conventional upbringing, and knows no fear, we are made to see that fear is not merely an instinct but is also inculcated through the conventions imposed on social life – threats of punishment are inherent in socialization.

Cultivated Fear

for some
charity, mercy, goodness –
love
makes the world go round
for others,
peace, submission,

for all
fervent faith
morality in the metaphor

but in the real world
not of any faith
the moral axis
of the world's rotation
is the rule of fear –
the threat in regulation

parents know it:
'listen or be punished';
friends know it:

'be like me or be alone';
teachers know it:
'learn or you will never earn';
priests know it:
'behave yourself or go to hell';
advertisers know it:
'get this or you won't get that';
insurance companies know it:
'pay up now or suffer later';
criminals know it:
'your money or your life';
politicians know it:
'vote for me or no security'
warmongers know it:
'fight or give up liberty'

And everyone knows
if you have no fear
if you love, trust, believe
you are plainly quite naive.

So we live behind our bars
consigning love, peace, trust
good will, good deeds
to the places of their origin
the metaphors
of holy books

Siegfried has grown up outside of social convention – that means he has no connection to Wotan and has no fear. Unlike everyone else who is constrained by concepts of right and wrong, Siegfried, unaware of protocols, acts with authenticity, free from symbolic control. He lives in the natural world and takes for granted the reality and validity of human existence. Truth for him, therefore, is always relative.

Being free of convention Siegfried is free of fear but his fearlessness, is not the fearlessness of a conventional hero, a Robin Hood or a Batman, who understands the danger that he faces. Siegfried's fearlessness arises from ignorance – he does not understand danger and, therefore, does not fear. And like a curious child, he wants to know what fear is and hopes to find it. We imagine he will know it when he encounters the dragon that guards the gold. But he does not. Not understanding danger, he simply takes the dragon for granted and his encounter with it becomes a playful dance, not a struggle unto death. Siegfried kills the dragon not because he is afraid, but as punishment for the

dragon's hostility and its threat to devour him. He then gets the ring, doesn't understand its significance, puts it on his finger and it stays out of reach of Wotan. It is no longer a symbol of power; it is merely a bauble. Siegfried, confident in his own power, is self-reliant. The ring, as a symbol of human self-reliance, is redundant to Siegfried.

On his way to rescue Brünnhilde, he meets Wotan who challenges him. He breaks Wotan's spear which represents the symbolic power of the supernatural over human existence. Siegfried's action, like Alberich's ring, is the declaration of an independent human being that he controls his own destiny. And Wotan leaves in despair; goes back to Valhalla to await the end.

Unaware of the effect he has had on Wotan, Siegfried continues on his quest to find Brünnhilde. When he sees her, he is overawed by a passion foreign to him that reduces his independence. Fear for him, is not associated with dragons, with danger, but with the passion of love; another reversal of conventional expectation. Siegfried, a wide-eyed innocent, in becoming aware of his sexuality, experiences fear. He has been fearless up to now because he has been in complete control of his feelings. With Brünnhilde, however, he encounters passion; it is new and strange; it takes control of him and makes him helpless. As he does not know how to deal with it, he becomes afraid – especially as she does not fall mindlessly into his arms but demands respect for herself as an independent being.

Respect, a form of commitment, is outside Siegfried's experience, as it carries with it obligation. He has been

totally free of obligation until now. For the first time in his life, he is required to make a commitment, accommodate another. Siegfried's lack of fear had not made commitment necessary. Commitment is the obverse side of fear: we commit ourselves to others through rules and regulations that bind us together for our security. That to a large extent obviates external fears but replaces them with fear of the consequences of breaking rules. As Siegfried has, up to now, made rules and regulations that apply only to himself, he is committed to no one else and consequently fears no one. But love creates dependency and requires commitment; it reduces absolute reliance on self. In having to give himself to another, he has to give up total independence and that fills him with fear as well as longing. And he experiences fear as pleasurable, titillating.

But he remains free of normal fear so he is also free of suspicion and that leads to his downfall. Not having been programmed for life in society, he cannot follow its norms and consequently, does not have the capacity to understand the dissembling of others. He takes everything at face value, does not question anyone's motives and is easy prey for the unscrupulous.

So we learn that in order to live in community, it is necessary to know how it operates and where its threats lie. One has to know fear if one is to survive.

Despite her wisdom, Brünnhilde sees Siegfried as the traditional hero; she is like a mother boasting of her wonderful child. Though commentators mention incest when it comes to Siegmund and Sieglinde, they simply accept the relationship between Brünnhilde and Siegfried. I find it quite intriguing – not the age difference or the fact that they are technically aunt and nephew, but that Siegfried is really Brünnhilde's conception

and creation, not physically, but emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. She knew he had been conceived before his parents did. She foretold of his existence; she named him. She knew he was the hero, that Other, that Wotan longed for and she has always loved him. When she gives him her horse, Grane, he rides off on adventures as she once had. She sees herself in him and believes him to be the greatest hero that ever lived.

Ironically, he is not the traditional noble hero that she imagines! Though she transfers her strength and wisdom to him, he is still a child, ignorant of the ways of the world.

His lack of social conditioning deprives him of a sense of continuity of events; he lives in the moment and his memory is short-term. When he is separated from Brünnhilde, he falls victim to the Gibichungs, is attracted to Gutrune, falls victim to Hagen's schemes and betrays Brünnhilde. She in turn betrays him and that leads to his death. When he is dying, he remembers and expresses the totality of his love for Brünnhilde, reaffirming that they are one. When his body is brought back from the forest, she too reaffirms their oneness. Consequently his death is her death. And she rides into the flames of his pyre to die with him.

DEATH

Wotan's punishment of Brünnhilde is really a reward. He turns her into a human being and Brünnhilde experiences passionate love and fulfilment – and, ironically, lives the life for which Wotan yearns. But she is no longer immortal, no longer an ideal; she is flesh and blood, real, subject to death. That, for Wotan, is the worst punishment he can impose.

Why does he, an immortal, see death in this light? It is not something he can experience and for humans who believe in him, it is a transition from temporal incomplete existence to everlasting complete supernatural existence. So death, has no significance. As John Donne put it, “Death thou shalt die.” So why does Wotan regard it as the ultimate punishment? It is illogical and indicates fear of death; as such it gives the lie to supernatural existence.

Fear of death, drives Wotan and in his quest to find a fearless hero to protect Valhalla, he is looking for life insurance for the gods. But Wotan’s search for a fearless hero, is the search for his nemesis, Siegfried, who, like Alberich affirms the reality of human existence. And that means acceptance of mortality, of death as the end, not as a doorway to an afterlife. It is the greatest threat to Wotan and the gods.

The acceptance of death as the end of life is affirmation of the reality of human existence; confirms it as substantial, and annuls the concept of an afterlife. It indicates that gods owe their existence to the human fear of death. And riding on Grane into the fire like a victorious hero to join Siegfried in death, Brünnhilde declares that death legitimates the independent reality of human life. Death gives definition to life. Death redeems us from the notion that life on earth is not an end in itself. Brünnhilde’s death proclaims the reality of human existence; a reality filled with passion – the fire that both creates and consumes. Brünnhilde, born of fire and consumed by fire, in accepting death as an end, makes the final declaration of the validity, reality and independence of human existence.

Immolation, the final brush stroke that completes the picture of her existence, turns it into a perfect whole. Her life thus becomes an artwork. And in art, a metaphoric representation of life in the world, lies the possibility of everlasting human life. Wagner’s *Der Ring des Niebelungen* lives on past its creator’s death; Brünnhilde, Alberich, Wotan cannot die while we are here to witness their struggles. And Wagner lives on through them, through *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, which, in itself, expresses human validity and reality; it is the work of man, the creator. And it is life giving – it leads to the creativity of others: Robert Lepage and his Ex Machina team devising a magical set, singers bringing characters to life, James Levine, Fabio Luisi and the orchestra providing a musical context for that life, all the wonderfully disciplined behind-the-scenes-people coordinating movement and lighting and all those unseen, unheard contributors to the grand presentation.

Their recreation of Wagner’s Ring Cycle is the triumphant affirmation of human reality. It is a powerful reminder that all art expresses the meaning of life and is a celebration of concrete existence in the world.

WAGNER’S ANTI-SEMITISM

In art, one can achieve perfection. In life one cannot. Wagner was not perfect, but his art is and lives on despite his anti-Semitism – the *Niebelungen*, Alberich and Mime, based on Wagner’s negative view of Jewish people. The Rhine maidens ridicule Alberich, driving him to renounce love and turning him into one preoccupied with wealth. Their contempt is echoed in Siegfried’s disgust for and dislike of Mime, Alberich’s brother. And Mime, whose name derives

from mimicry, is born of Wagner's notion that Jews are mimics not original creators of art – he makes this clear in his evaluation of the music of Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer in his 1850 article, *Das Judentum in Musik*.

Wagner's prejudice goes side by side with his genius as a librettist and composer. Nobody is perfect, not even geniuses. People who look for perfection in Wagner, because his artistic achievement is brilliant, are people looking for Valhalla. We would prefer it, if Wagner did not exhibit such an obvious failing as prejudice, especially as anti-Semitism immediately recalls horrifying visions of the holocaust. But Wagner was a human being and, like most human beings, believed in the superiority of his culture. Nevertheless, though perhaps inadvertently, he wins sympathy, mine definitely, for Alberich, who is forced to live without love; and admiration, again mine, for his ingenuity and his acceptance of worldly existence as valid human reality.

Wagner would probably have despised someone like me; but having lived seventy years in South Africa, I understand prejudice as the result of ignorance. And Wagner's ignorance alongside his genius is what makes him supremely human.

By Muthal Naidoo

2004 A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals 2004 Jail Birds and Others

2007 Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar

2008 WIP Theatre Plays

2011 Gansie in Kammaland

2012 Emerging Heroes

2012 The Keshwars from Dundee

2013 Rhulani's Dilemma

2014 Metaphoric Being

2014 Kaliyuga: The End in the Beginning

2015 Mirroring Nature



Love

passion
breaking through
human bondage
in the bond
to union
of self
in the other
Freedom!