CHAPTER VII

DISCOVERING THE PUPPETEER IN THE TEXT
A Zen-based reading of Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the sky*

7.1 INTRODUCTION

As in the previous chapter, the aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the practical application and assess the heuristic value of the Zen-based Reading Procedure. The text used for this demonstration is Lee Kok Liang's novel, *Flowers in the sky* (henceforth *Flowers*). The Procedure's heuristic value is assessed by whether it enables more insights into the novel's discourses and whether the reading outcome differs significantly from those of past readings by critics using other approaches.

In this introduction (7.1) I shall first explain the critical importance of *Flowers* for the demonstration of the Zen-based Reading Procedure, with emphasis on the fact that *Flowers* is a Zen-influenced novel. I shall then summarise the methodology used in this reading, focusing on some of the minor adjustments that have to be made to accommodate the peculiarities of the novel's style and structure. This is followed by the demonstration of the reading, which is set out in three readings. Section 7.2 demonstrates the First Reading. Section 7.3 demonstrates the Second Reading. Section 7.4 demonstrates the Third Reading. Section 7.5 demonstrates the procedure for discovering new and hidden discourses from the outcome of the Third Reading. Section 7.6 reviews past readings of *Flowers* by critics who have interpreted the novel using other approaches. Section 7.7 summarises the chapter.

7.1.1 Critical importance of *Flowers* for the Zen-based reading demonstration

Flowers was first published in 1981. It was Lee Kok Liang's first full-length novel and the only one published during his lifetime[1]. The novel's critical importance for this demonstration is that, like much of Lee's shorter fiction, *Flowers* explores social problems in Malaysia from a Zen perspective.[2] It therefore provides the opportunity to show how the

Zen-based Reading Procedure works in tandem with the perspectives of a known or clearly identified belief or value system.

In one respect *Flowers* presents challenges similar to those presented by *Scorpion orchid*; it is complex and dense, and it makes use of indirection, silences and gaps to tell its story. But in another respect, it presents challenges that are very different. As a fiction writer, Lee challenges the view that by virtue of his English education, the Anglophone Malaysian writer has no choice but to draw on western techniques of narration. Typical of such a view is this comment by T. Wignesan in his Postscript to *Bunga Emas* (1964), a collection of local works written before the formation of Malaysia in 1963. In the Postscript, entitled "The Malayan Short Story in English", Wignesan states (*ibid*: 234):

> It is difficult to claim for these writers an *independent* literary tradition of their own…. If the element of local colour can be skimmed from their stories, we may see them merely as an off-shoot of literary movements that are the product of other times in other places. … As they were essentially English-educated, they turned to the outside world through the medium of the English language. They were open to influences, however corrupt or beneficial, inherent in Anglo-American life and literature.

Going on to identify Lee Kok Liang as one of three local writers who have managed to produce short stories that are "properly written", Wignesan remarks (*ibid*: 235), "These writers have been careful to adapt foreign techniques to local material."

My reading of *Flowers* shows that in fact Lee's treatment of formal categories such as structure and plot do not conform to western ideas and ideals of fiction-writing. For this reason, the novel is one of the best arguments for a non-European approach to local fiction and perhaps even the development of a new metalanguage for local fiction studies.

7.1.2 Summary of methodology

The basic methodology for this reading remains as has been explained in Chapters V and VI (6.1.3); and I shall not repeat it here. What I want to explain here are some of the adjustments that have had to be made, not to the application of the Procedure itself, but to the reporting of the details of the application in this chapter. The adjustments are necessary

because of the complexity of the novel and its discourses; and within the confines of this chapter it is possible only to cover the main issues, addressing others either only in the broadest terms or leaving them out altogether. Due to such constraints, I shall adopt the following reporting strategies.

In presenting 3-Perceptions (3P) comparisons of characters, I shall not discuss all the main characters individually as I have done in the case of *Scorpion*. Compared to *Scorpion*, which has five or six main characters presented to us as sketches with few strokes, *Flowers* has a large cast of characters and in some cases, their histories are presented in considerable detail. Although one-pointed investigations of all the characters have been done, it would be impossible to describe the outcome of the investigations in detail here. Some of the comparisons will therefore be done group by group rather individual by individual. In the Third Reading, for instance, where I compare the representation of women in the epigraph with the representation of women in the novel, I review the female characters as a group, noting variations and exceptions as I do so.

In discussing the discourses, I shall pay more attention to the socio-political discourse (7.5.1) because this is the area critics have focused on in the past, and one of the aims of this demonstration is to ascertain whether and how my reading diverges from theirs. However, because some background knowledge of the *Surangama sutra* (the source of the novel's epigraph) is crucial to an understanding of the Buddhist monk, Hung, I shall dwell on aspects of the history of its composition, and its contents insofar as they have an impact on my approach to the novel's depiction of Hung's values and behaviour. Finally, I shall point out some non-western aspects of Lee's techniques of narration.

I shall use the first person singular to indicate that I am presenting my personal response to the text and not the "definitive" interpretation of the novel. The text used in this reading is the 1991 edition of *Flowers*. Page numbers appear in brackets.

7.2 FIRST READING

The objectives of the First Reading are (1) to synthesise textual data and (2) to define the Key Conflict (KC), which is the Break-in Tool required for entry into the Second Reading. No special critical tool is used during the reading. I read the text normally to synthesise

textual data, but in doing so, take note of the segments or aspects of the text that cause conflict or discomfort.

7.2.1 Synthesising textual data

The story is set in an unnamed city on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Based on the text's reference to a recent plane crash "into the swamps at the edge of the Peninsula" from which there were no survivors (109), the fictional present is assumed to be some time between 1977 and 1980[3]. The narrative centres on three events that occur over two days in the life of a successful surgeon of Sri Lankan descent, known as Mr. K. The first event determines the time-frame of the narrative's present. It begins at 3.00 p.m. on Wednesday, when K. performs a herniotomy on a Chinese Buddhist monk, the Venerable Hung; and ends at 10 a.m. the following Monday when Hung leaves the clinic. Through the recollections of these two characters, who are immigrants to the country, the novel's setting broadens out to cover China, Ceylon, and India; and time stretches back to the early part of the twentieth century, when Peninsular Malaysia was British Malaya.

The second event, a comedy of errors, occurs on Thursday. A statue of the Hindu god, Ganesh, has been washed up overnight on the shore directly in front Mr. and Mrs. K.'s home, and their garden is now invaded by a crowd of devotees who will not leave until sunset. This is the time identified by Swami Gomez, the spiritual leader of the devotees, as the propitious time for the performance of the proper rituals required to transfer the statue to a temple in town. This does not please Mrs. K., who wants them to leave immediately. Mr. K., who is too busy at the surgery to deal with the situation himself, contacts the police. The Deputy Superintendent of Police, DSP Ismail, judging this to be an "Indian affair", sends Inspector Gopal from the Anti-Vice Division to disperse the crowd. Inspector Gopal, secretly a devout Hindu with an interest in Tantrism, is unable to accede to Mrs. K.'s demand that he "kick them out". He therefore instructs one of his constables to radio DSP Ismail for further instruction. The constable, a jealous husband, takes the opportunity to use the radio to check on the whereabouts of the object of his suspicions, Inspector Hashim. Hashim, who happens to be in charge of the Crowd Control Division, duly arrives at the house with his riot squad. Eventually he manages to resolve the matter through compromise and diplomacy with the help of his friend, Gabriel Mahalingam, a local politician. Mrs. K. grudgingly gives in to the crowd's demands and leaves for Singapore in a huff. For everyone else the story ends happily. Swami Gomez and the Ganesh devotees are allowed to

leave at sunset, taking with them Inspector Gopal, who is so deeply affected by the experience that he decides to resign from the police force and marry Mr. K.'s maid, Nila, whom he considers to be the "Shakti" or Tantric partner he has long been looking for. He later becomes a full-time devotee of Lord Ganesh. Swami Gomez's temple becomes "famous overnight" (94) and prospers as donations start pouring in. G. Mahalingam meanwhile gets the credit for saving the day and enhances his political standing.

The third event takes place at the clinic on Thursday, the same day as the Ganesh incident. It begins at 3.00 p.m., when K. performs bowel surgery on Ah Looi, a 30-year-old woman with stomach cancer; and it ends with her death at about 10.30 p.m. Just before she dies, she manages to find comfort in talking about a recurrent bad dream to Hung's sister, Pek Sim, whom she mistakes for a nun. The narrative is silent about the two following days and leapfrogs to its close at 10 a.m. on Monday. At the Marvellous Cure Centre, K. receives two telephone calls: one from a tearful and angry Mrs. K., to whom he apologises; and one from Inspector Hashim, whom he informs he will not press charges against the crowd. The narrative ends with Mr. K. watching from his window the departure of the Venerable Hung in his Mercedes with the registration number 666, which to Mr. K. is the sign of the devil but to Hung signifies "Joy, Joy, Joy" in Cantonese. The novel thus closes on a note of reconciliation on the one hand, and on the other, an ironic reminder that the cultural gulf between Hung and K. is as vast as ever.

Around each event is a cluster of characters, each with his or her "story". The novel is therefore a complex network of stories within stories. The principal "centres of consciousness" are Mr. K. and Hung. Through their ruminations we learn of their respective childhoods in Sri Lanka and China, the circumstances leading to their migration to Malaysia, the adjustments and compromises they had to make to survive and prosper in their new homeland, and their present state of mind. However, it is in the symphony of "voices" of the different characters, including that of a gossipy narrator, that the novel provides a sampling of how Malaysians of different ethnicity, age, gender, education, profession, and language skills deal with political and other changes of the 1970s in their social discourse and intercourse.

As a whole, the narrative lacks the coherence and dramatic force of the typical Aristotelian plot. Although there is, relatively speaking, unity of time and place, the events do not work together to drive the dramatic action to a unified climax and resolution. Of the

three events identified, only the Ganesh incident may be said to have a plot in that there is a conflict and a resolution accompanied by dramatic changes in the lives of some of the characters involved. However, this incident does not affect and is not affected by the two other events, namely Hung's operation and Ah Looi's death. Hung's and Ah Looi's stories converge when the dying woman asks to speak to Pek Sim. But the encounter between them has an effect only on Ah Looi (in that Pek Sim's attention and chanting seem to calm her) and not on anyone else. Mr. K. is the point of convergence for the three incidents, but his life is not significantly changed by them. The three events are contiguous rather than interlocked, and the impression is that the novel aims to do little more than present a slice of Malaysian life—warts and all.

The story is told in the third-person by an unnamed, omniscient narrator. Sometimes he takes the reader into the minds of the characters (principally Hung, K., and Inspector Hashim) and presents their free indirect discourse from their limited, subjective viewpoints. Sometimes he communicates their thoughts, memories, and past histories (as in the case of Gopal and Swami Gomez) in his own voice; that is, as the all-knowing story teller. Occasionally he speaks to the reader directly, sharing information that some characters cannot know about: "What Mr. K. failed to realize was… (53)"; "Another thing that was not known to his colleagues was… (54)"; "What Inspector Gopal did not know was… (62). However, when he chooses, he remains silent about certain characters and events, the prime example being whether there is a physical relationship between Ah Hung and Ah Lan. Another significant feature of the narrative style is that, apart from a brief, direct insight into Pek Sim's mind (133-44), the interiority of the women is closed to the reader. Whatever the reader knows about them is filtered through the perceptions and thoughts of the other, mainly male, characters. *Flowers* is therefore a predominantly male-voiced text.

7.2.2 Noting the Conflict Areas

My conflicts with the novel stem from the openly impolite way issues of gender, race, the socio-political scene, and the religious practices of the various ethnic groups are presented. In the male voices is a strong element of male chauvinism; almost without exception the men respond to the sight of women in a sexual and sexist way. Another recurrent feature is the characters' preoccupation with skin colour, and the suggestion that their preferred skin colour is that of the "fair" Chinese; so that I sense a bias in favour of the Chinese. The third area of conflict is the racially divisive way the country's socio-political issues are given

"voice" to, through Mr. K., Inspector Hashim, and the narrator. Finally, I have a conflict with the text's treatment of religious practices, which also suggests a bias towards the Chinese. The Ganesh incident, which centres on the belief system of Swami Gomez and his followers and Inspector Gopal's secret search for spiritual fulfilment, is treated as a comedy. On the other hand, Hung's contest with the temple committee over the placement of the War God statue and his struggle with his lust for Ah Lan are presented from his own point of view, and treated with great seriousness. I know that the narration of Gopal's spiritual search has a comic effect because it is relayed to me (the reader) by the gossipy narrator; and Hung's spiritual struggle seems serious because it is presented to me from his own point of view. But what is the reason for this creative decision on the part of the author (i.e. Lee Kok Liang)?

This question is difficult to answer because in *Flowers*, the whole text is made up of the free indirect discourse of the gossipy narrator and the characters; and the free indirect discourse is characterised by the absence of clear demarcations between the points of view or "focalisations" and the language or "utterances" of the narrator and those of the characters (see Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 110-6)[4]. As a result, I have difficulty distinguishing the narrator's perspective from that of the characters. In the following passage, where Hashim is looking at himself in a mirror, who is responsible for the racial stereotyping implied in describing Hashim as being "almost as fair as a Chinese" and in the generalisation that "most Malays" are "thicklipped" (64)?

> He was handsome; he had known that from small. They called him 'Puteh' when he was small. *Fair, almost as fair as a Chinese*. 'Puteh'. He had dark wavy hair and, *unlike most Malays, a beautiful mouth, with perfect curves—not thicklipped.*

Is it Hashim or the narrator who is judging Hashim's looks by racial stereotypes? If it is Hashim, why is he using the ideals of other races to judge himself? And if it is the narrator, is his racial stereotyping being critiqued or being endorsed? In other words, is the author participating in the male chauvinism, the racial stereotyping, and the religious bias evident in the narrative? The epigraph seems to suggest that he is, so I shall make the epigraph my first Key Conflict (KC1).

7.2.3 Defining first Key Conflict (KC1): the epigraph

For this reading demonstration, I am identifying as my first Key Conflict (KC1) the epigraph, which shows women in a bad light and seems to suggest that the male disparagement of women is justified on grounds of gender and religion. The epigraph consists of two sentences; one about a Buddhist nun (*Bhiksuni*) who breaks her vow of celibacy and the other about a "low-caste" woman who uses magic to seduce a man. It reads as follows (1):

> The Bhiksuni 'Fragrance of the Precious Lotus', after receiving the rules of bodhisattva discipline, fornicated and pretended it was neither killing nor stealing and was, therefore, not subject to karmic retribution. As a result, after her genital organ had been slowly scorched by the flame of passion, she fell into unintermittent hell.
> Matangi (a low caste woman) succeeded by means of Kapila magic, in drawing him close to her sensual body on the mat.

Both sentences appear to be from a Buddhist text, but the source is not identified. The description of the errant nun's horrifying punishment, even understood metaphorically, strikes me as un-Buddhist-like in spirit and tone; and my suspicion is that the epigraph has been fabricated at least in part by the author to lend religious support to the male characters' attitude towards women. However, I cannot be certain because there is a misogynistic strain in the Buddhist monastic tradition[5], and it is reflected in Hung's attitude and behaviour towards women.

My KC1 question is: Has the epigraph been fabricated to lend religious support to the disparagement of women by the male characters in the novel?

7.3 SECOND READING

The first objective of the Second Reading is to determine whether there is any textual basis for my KC1 (i.e. my suspicion that the author has fabricated the epigraph to justify male disparagement of women). The second objective is to formulate a KC Discourse Hypothesis, which is the Diagnostic Tool needed for the Third Reading. To achieve the first objective, a one-pointed investigation of the epigraph is conducted. In focusing on the epigraph, I am

using the Principal and Satellites (P&S) Forensic Tool. For the investigation of the epigraph, I am using the 3-Perceptions (3P) Forensic Tool. The 3P are (1) my Imagined Perception of the epigraph, based on my First Reading; (2) the Narrated Perception, which is the epigraph in the context of the source-text; and (3) my Modified Perception, which is my revised view of the epigraph after comparing the Imagined Perception and the Narrated Perception. My KC1 Discourse Hypothesis will be based on the Modified Perception.

7.3.1 Imagined Perception of the epigraph

My Imagined Perception of the epigraph is based on my impression formed at the First Reading. My impression is that it has been included to provide scriptural support for the disparagement of women. The epigraph presents a disturbingly sordid picture of womanhood. It assigns culpability for both acts of sexual misconduct—fornication and seduction—solely to the woman. The Bhiksuni is doubly culpable because not only has she broken her vow of celibacy; she has also "pretended" that sexual misconduct is not subject to karmic retribution. Her punishment is described in such horrifying terms that I am inclined to think that the author has fabricated at least some part of the epigraph to give the impression that there is scriptural support for the male chauvinism evident in the attitude and behaviour of the novel's narrator and some of the male characters.

I am also doubtful of the authenticity of the Matangi line because its rhetorical devices convey the arguments frequently used in contemporary "male-voiced" defences against charges of rape and other breaches of sexual morality. She is cast as the initiating agent who exerts a magnetic force on the man ("drawing him close"). The man, cast as the victim, is unidentified, protected by anonymity; while she, the predator, is identified by name and social class—"low-caste", implying that the man is socially her superior. What she draws him to is her "sensual body", a phrase that not only objectifies the woman but also imputes to the object a gender-related essentialism—sensuality. She is drawing him down to the mat, on which she is recumbent, a physical position reflecting her social and moral status. Finally, her use of "Kapila magic" suggests that she is both devious and a religious deviant (from the Buddhist point of view); magic is one of those "female" things that men are powerless against; and it is because of her magic that she "nearly" succeeds in seducing the man, suggesting that he is not responding to her body but to the magic.

The Matangi line brings to mind the episode where the monk, Hung, is sorely tempted by the sudden appearance of Ah Lan, the mute girl, at the door while he is trying to concentrate on his meditation (165-66). The novel is tantalisingly silent about whether anything of a sexual nature happened between them. Is this line about Matangi a suggestion that Hung was seduced by Ah Lan? Am I then supposed to interpret Hung's burning of himself with hot wax to overcome his desires as either an act of contrition or an act of heroic self-restraint?

7.3.2 Narrated Perception of the epigraph

The Narrated Perception of the epigraph is based on my research on its source-text, to determine the nature of the original contexts of the two lines quoted in the novel. The source of both lines of the epigraph is Lu K'uan Yu's translation of the *Surangama sutra* (henceforth "*Surangama*"). The *sutra* is mentioned on page 121 of the novel. For this reading, the 1989 edition of Lu's translation is used. The man seduced by Matangi is the monk Ananda. The story of his temptation and timely rescue by the Buddha's more powerful *mantra* introduces the s*utra*. Interestingly, neither Ananda nor Matangi is punished. Instead they get a long lecture (the *sutra* proper) from the Buddha, and Matangi subsequently becomes a nun, changing her name to "Self-nature". She has nothing to do with the nun called "Fragrance of the Precious Lotus", who appears much later in the *sutra* and is in fact only a hypothetical case cited by Ananda when he asks the Buddha whether hells are "really somewhere" or "self-existing for every sinner to suffer in them" (Lu, 1989: 176). The Buddha's answer gives the Zen perspective on how I might judge the wrongdoings of the characters in *Flowers*. It is that all living beings are "fundamentally pure", but because of their "wrong views" they form bad habits for which there is karmic retribution, but the retribution is the "self-inflicted" result of "individual evil deeds"[6] (*ibid*: 178-9).

Some interesting historical facts emerge from the research on the background to the *Surangama*. These facts help to explain some of Hung's practices and beliefs, which are peculiar only to Chinese Buddhism and strike Buddhists of other schools of thought as strange and contradictory to the Buddha's teachings. The *sutra* first appeared in China in 705 C.E. and has since been extremely influential in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. It purports to be a translation from the Sanskrit, but many scholars of Buddhism today believe that it is totally or partially a Chinese composition, one of a number of *sutras* written to

make Buddhist doctrines (especially the renunciation of family life and the vow of celibacy) more acceptable to the Chinese (Muller 1998). Among the "doctrinal innovations" (Benn 1998) is the practice of burning oneself as an expression of sincerity when making vows; a practice that has its origins in indigenous (i.e. non-Buddhist) Chinese folk beliefs and practices. This is why, in *Flowers*, the burn scars on Hung's head sustained during his ordination (159-61) puzzle Mr. K. who is familiar only with Theravada Buddhism (30-1). The *sutra* also contains a passage advocating burning parts of the body as a "short cut" to *nirvana*. The monk who undergoes this ordeal, it is said, will "repay all … karmic debts since time without beginning, will leave the worldly way forever and will escape from the stream of transmigration" (Lu 1989: 155). I shall discuss the connection between this passage and Hung's repeated burning of himself with hot wax later, when I examine Hung's character more closely.

Apart from such interpolations, the doctrines taught in the *Surangama* are mainstream Mahayana (see Ch. III and IV). There is a passage (Lu, *ibid*: 101) particularly helpful in providing some yardsticks for evaluating whether Hung's beliefs and practices are conducive to enlightenment. The passage contradicts the notion that there are short cuts to enlightenment and *nirvana* with the statement that they "cannot be attained without aeons of practice and experience". It asserts that "memorizing and remembering" the Buddha's teachings without proper practice "will only increase sophistry". It confirms that women are capable of becoming enlightened, citing Matangi and the Buddha's own wife as examples. And it identifies self-deception and clinging to illusions as the twin root causes of faulty beliefs and practices. The passage ends with this question to Ananda: "Why do you still deceive yourself by clinging to what you see and hear?"

A final fact crucial to my understanding of *Flowers* is the *Surangama*'s description of clinging (*upadana,* see Ch. III, 3.3.2). Clinging is described as one of twelve kinds of "inversions" or "upside-down" ways of looking, which, "like dancing flowers seen when one rubs one's eyes, overturn the perfect and pure Enlightened Mind and cause wrong thinking" (Lu, *ibid*: 163). Thus, the novel's title "flowers in the sky" means illusions, and not *nirvana* (as has been suggested by Harrex, 1982). This is stated explicitly in the following verse (Lu, *ibid*: 116):

> True Nature is free from all phenomena
> Which are illusions by causes created.

> Noumena neither rise nor fall, but all
> Phenomena are *flowers in the sky*.
> The unreal reveals the real
> But both are but illusions.
> Since there is nothing real nor unreal
> How can there be a subject and an object? (*Italics mine*)

7.3.3 Modified Perception of the epigraph

My Modified Perception of the epigraph is based on a comparison of my Imagined Perception and the Narrated Perception. My research into the *Surangama* has shown that my suspicion that the epigraph might be a fabrication is partially correct. Lee has deliberately reversed the order of the passages and juxtaposed them as if they were parts of a single story. So the "reality" of the *sutra* has revealed the "unreality" of Lee's epigraph. On the one hand, Lee's juxtaposition of the two passages has had the effect of making me conscious of the misogynistic strain that is part of the reality of the Buddhist tradition; and in this regard, Lee's "fabricated" epigraph is a case of the "unreal" revealing the "real".

At this point it occurred to me that in fabricating his epigraph, Lee is using the same kind of "puppet-kill-puppet" technique used by Nagarjuna (see Chapter IV, 4.4.4), where literary fiction is deliberately constructed to expose the illusions of existential fictions. My hypothesis is that the purpose of the epigraph-"puppet" is to expose the baselessness of the misogynistic and gynophobic arguments frequently used to justify male chauvinism and other forms of marginalising women. On the basis of this Modified Perception of the epigraph, I formulate my KC1 Discourse Hypothesis.

7.3.4 KC1 Discourse Hypothesis based on Modified Perception

My KC1 Discourse Hypothesis is:

> The epigraph has been deliberately constructed to demolish the idea that there is any basis for disparaging and marginalising women.

This KC1 Discourse Hypothesis is my Diagnostic Tool in the Third Reading.

7.4 THIRD READING: VALIDATING KC1 DISCOURSE HYPOTHESIS

The objectives of the Third Reading are to validate the KC1 Discourse Hypothesis and, through the process of validation, discover new KCs and discourses. The first three steps are: (1) identify and re-read segments resembling the KC; (2) conduct one-pointed investigation of identified segments; and (3) compare these segments with the KC1 Discourse Hypothesis; if they fit, the KC1 Discourse Hypothesis is validated, and the segments can be filtered out as part of KC1 Discourse. The fourth step is taken when the segments do not fit; in which case the problematics are used to formulate new KC Discourse Hypotheses. The process of validation involves the use of the 3-Perceptions (3P) Forensic Tool, where the Imagined Perception is the Discourse Hypothesis; the Narrated Perception is what the text has to say about the segments of the text under investigation; and the Modified Perception is the result of the comparison between the Imagined and the Narrated. The one-pointed investigations imply the use of the Principal and Satellites (P&S) Forensic Tool and, when relevant, the 10-Timeframes (10P) Tool. The validation of the Discourse Hypothesis is less important than the discovery of discourses. The aim is not so much to find confirmation as to look for aspects that do not fit in my Hypothesis, because these are the aspects that will lead to the discovery of hidden discourses.

7.4.1 Identifying in-text stories or segments resembling epigraph

The most striking aspect of the epigraph is that it is about two dissolute women; one a hypocritical Buddhist nun who has broken her vow of celibacy, the other a woman who uses magic to seduce a monk. I shall therefore begin the validation process by conducting a one-pointed investigation of the women characters in the novel to see if there is any that matches either of the women in the epigraph.

7.4.2 One-pointed investigation of women characters

In contradiction to the impression of women given in the epigraph, there is a strong feminist element in the narrative’s portrayal of women. There is no woman character remotely like Matangi and Fragrance of the Precious Lotus, unless one counts the briefly mentioned woman caught with her lover in a hotel room by Gopal and his anti-vice squad (54). The only occasion when a woman literally pulls a man down to a mat is when Nila (Mr. K.’s maid) and Gopal are knocked down by the crowd of Ganesh worshippers reacting to the

approach of Inspector Hashim's Red Helmets; and what Gopal succumbs to are her tears (87).

When one reflects on the women in the text, one becomes conscious of how many of them there are and the supportive role they play in the lives of the men. Pek Sim and Mrs. K. are depicted as practical, strong, capable women. They are ambitious for the men in their lives; and are willing and able to do what is necessary to ensure that the men succeed and prosper in their chosen careers. Hung depends on Pek Sim and Ah Lan for the management of the temple and his daily life. K. is surrounded by at least a dozen women in his clinic—Matron Q, the secretary, the nurses, and the general helpers—on whom he depends not only for the smooth running of the clinic, but also for maintaining his peace of mind. For instance, he needs his secretary, Miss Kim, to sort out the minor crises caused by his chauffeur (3) and his wife (49). Besides the chauffeur, the only male members of staff mentioned are Bhutto, the shifter of lights in the operating theatre (100-3), and the hospital assistants assigned to Hung (32).

Also depicted is the nurturing side of women. Pek Sim loves Ah Lan "as she would her own daughter" (135). Mrs. K., generally seen as an aggressive woman, had once placed a pillow under K.'s head when he came home drunk and fell asleep on the floor (25). And her son testifies to a "jolly" side to her, which K. fails to see (49). Ah Lan's compassionate nature is suggested in the way she reacts to the God of War statue: she "suddenly seized hold of the scrawny emaciated figure of the human and tried to pry it from under the foot" of the god (129).[7] In the scene with Ah Looi, although Ah Lan would not have heard what Ah Looi is saying about her dream she understands enough to keep looking at the ceiling with an expression "compounded of dread and a fierce desire to destroy" (153). The women are often shown having the ability to intuit the needs of others and the willingness to minister to those needs without being told. Thus Pek Sim anticipates Hung's every need, from a glass of water (131) to a house and a pool with "imported gold carps" (143). O. Sim, the theatre nurse, intuits that K.'s back is aching, and massages it for him while tying up his surgical gown (105). I find that on the whole, the novel's portrayal of women demolishes the male chauvinistic argument that women are physically, morally and intellectually the "weaker sex".

My discourse hypothesis is however, problematised by Ah Looi, Mr. K.'s cancer patient. Although she is far from being sexually dissolute, she does not quite fit into this

general portrayal of women as positive, intelligent, and independent managers and caregivers; and she comes across as emotionally dependent on her husband, not particularly caring of her children, somewhat vain, and generally very unconfident, fearful, and superstitious. I am not sure where to fit her in the scheme of things and must come back to her later.

Meanwhile, since my finding does not allow a conclusive validation of the KC1 Discourse Hypothesis, I shall now attempt a one-pointed investigation of each of the male characters. I have noted earlier that most of the men have a sexist attitude towards women. They are generally shown to have a problem keeping sex and sensuality out of their minds. They note external features such as the women's skin colour, moles, the sweat on their noses, clothes, and the size and shape of their breasts; and constantly wonder how it would be to have them as wives, mistresses or Shaktis. Hashim's recollection of the general gossip about the landlady who is too "mean" to fix a latch to her toilet door—"Some thought she had other motives. There were many younger and more masculine tenants in the building" (67)—establishes for me that the disparagement of women on the basis of their gender and sexuality is common practice. The politician Mahalingam, for instance, thinks it "just not worth his while" to take Mrs. K.'s side because "she was, after all only a woman" (93). I now take a closer look at the five major male characters, Hung, Gopal, Mr. K., Inspector Hashim, and Swami Gomez, to establish whether there is a case for assuming that this male chauvinistic attitude towards women is the "puppet" targeted for demolition by the epigraph-puppet.

7.4.3 One-pointed investigation of male characters

Of the five major male characters, only Hung, Gopal, and Mr. K. are guilty of thinking and speaking of women in disparaging terms. Hung's gynophobia is not in doubt. In the clinic he insists that all the women, including the nurse, leave the room before he can undress, "even though there are curtains". Otherwise, as the nurse explains to K., (6—*italics mine*), "The atmosphere will be wrong. *Like bad air*. It would hurt his spirit." While living in his first temple in Malaya, he washed his clothes himself and "hung them to dry on a separate line" (42). He has a low opinion of women's intellect (32): "But women were like that. They could not carry a thing in their heads." Gopal divides women into potential Shaktis and the rest; and he is "cautious with the one and abrupt with the other" (59). In his view Mrs. K. is one of the "rest"; and when he cannot bend her will to his, he compares her to "a cow

without a bull" (61). Mr. K. divides women according to the size of their breasts, their race, and their education: "when his mother arranged his marriage, his only stipulation was his bride should have large breasts" (4); "Chinese girls could be unpredictably cold and virginal, or worse, lusty and money-minded" (7); "Somehow he wished he had married a girl with native education. English education made one so arid and selfish…." (30). He excuses himself for wondering what it would be like to have Ah Lan as a "companion" with the thought, "But then, some women did arouse such a response in men" (154).

In contrast to them stand Inspector Hashim and Swami Gomez. Hashim has an active sex life—"he had to have his outings every other day" (69)—and he pays attention to the physical attributes of women (70). But his attitude towards women is quite enlightened. He appreciates Mrs. K. for non-sexual reasons: her "wonderful lilting voice", her "superb" command of Malay, and her "knowledgeable grasp" of police work. He also regards her as a model for the nation's future women—"One day there would be plenty of women like her in this country. Well informed and not shy" (71). Swami Gomez stands out as the only male character who does not think about women at all, leave alone size them up in terms of their physical attributes. There is even a suggestion that he disapproves of discrimination against women. When Gopal describes the "difficult" Mrs. K. as "a cow without a bull", the Swami "ignored his remark and stayed still" (61); then "suddenly" went into a trance and went off to pray in front of the Ganesh statue.

In examining these two groups of men, I find no correlation between religiosity and the presence or absence of misogyny. Both Hung and Swami Gomez are religious leaders, but stand at opposite ends in their attitude to women. Of the "lay" characters, Gopal is secretly a devout Hindu and a follower of the Tantric sect, a sect that celebrates the union between male and female (54) whereas Mr. K. "did not believe in anything anymore" (31). But Gopal and Mr. K. have problematic views about women, while Hashim, whose religiosity is not overwhelming—"Allah was kind" (65)—does not. I therefore take a closer look at the two non-male-chauvinists, Hashim and Gomez, to determine what they have in common with each other but not with Hung, Mr. K. and Gopal. I note that Hashim and Gomez are portrayed as well-integrated personalities. Unlike Hung, whose spirituality (as opposed to religiosity) is in doubt, Swami Gomez is a man of deep and sincere religious faith; he is, for instance, not a "self-advertising" guru (82). Inspector Hashim has a healthy attitude toward his own sexuality, and unlike Gopal, he is self-confident.

7.4.4 Redefining and validating KC1 Discourse Hypothesis

From these observations I redefine my KC1 Discourse Hypothesis to:

> The epigraph has been deliberately constructed to expose the correlation between men who have a negative attitude towards women and their lack of spiritual and psychological integrity.

I now have to validate this hypothesis by re-examining Hung, Gopal, and Mr. K. from the perspective of their spiritual and psychological state, with special reference to their attitudes towards sex and sexuality in general.

i. One-pointed investigation of Hung

Hung's story resembles most closely the two situations presented in the epigraph. Like Ananda in the *Surangama*, he is a monk overcome by desire for a woman. And like Fragrance of the Precious Lotus who "pretended" that fornication was not subject to karmic retribution, Hung tells himself he can repay all his karmic debts and escape rebirth by burning himself on the chest with hot wax. It has been suggested that this "auto-combustion" is an act of penance, or a spiritual battle against lust bordering on "heroism" (see Wong Phui Nam 1996); but from the Zen perspective it is evidence of clinging, first to the literal meaning of the words in the *sutra*; secondly to the craving for *nirvana* wrongly conceptualised as a real place in the afterlife separate and distinct from *samsara*; thirdly to a kind of greed in wanting to "cheat" the law of *karma* by repaying "all his karmic debts" in one go. Clinging is Hung's main problem; this was pointed out to him during his novitiate by the Abbott, who thereafter stopped receiving him for special meditation sessions (22).

The question asked by Ananda in the *Surangama*, as to whether hell is "really there" in terms of a physically existing place, is shown in the novel to be academic as far as Hung is concerned; he is already creating his own hell through his self-torture. More pertinent to my examination of the sexual aspect of his life is that the novel seems to suggest that he derives a perverse kind of pleasure from the self-inflicted pain, which is always associated with the sensuous beauty of the carp in the monastery pool. Using the 10T (Ten Timeframes) Forensic Tool to trace the development of the carp in Hung's mind, I find that during his ordination ceremony (161) he overcomes the pain of having the top of his head

burned with joss sticks by fixing his mind on the carp. It later becomes associated with Ah Lan's arms (129) and interferes with his meditation (130): "His mind kept slipping that night during his sitting. Always to the white carp and to the bare arms. It was as though he had become stained with a little spruce of desire. To possess. His nights became restless after that." The guilty association between the carp and his sensual desires would explain his otherwise unaccountable reaction to Ah Lan's drawings of carps (137-9). On the night of his temptation (165), the carp returns to his consciousness when the combined effect of the evening heat, the passion in the voice of the muezzin, and the sight of Ah Lan at the doorway makes him acutely aware of his body. Near the end of the novel, the association between Ah Lan's arms and the carp is automatic (172): "The hands of Ah Lan, the fingers of Ah Lan, moved in the air, with a life of their own, like graceful birds, smooth as the passage of the carp in the water."

The text also suggests that Hung has not conquered his feelings for Ah Lan; he has merely transmuted them into an unspoken bond of possession (another form of clinging). One notes the strange look he gives Mr. K. when he finds the surgeon looking at Ah Lan (45-6); .his gift to her of his mother's jade bracelet; and how upset he is at not finding it on her arm after Looi's death (172-3). Regardless of whether there is a physical relationship between him and Ah Lan, he is abusing his power over the mute girl. The novel's last words about him tell us the extent of his corruption: he "had used considerable influence upon the Registrar and Inspector of Motor Vehicles" to get a 666 number plate for his Mercedes.[8]

ii. One-pointed investigation of Gopal

Gopal is a comedic Ananda who finds his *shakti* (Tantric partner) in Nila when she "knocked him down onto the mat" and later, when he tries to get up, "pulled him down" (87). But there the similarity ends. He is a devout Hindu with an interest in Tantrism, something he keeps a secret out of embarrassment (53), not necessarily with the intention to deceive. His "inner self" is Arjuna (55), the Pandava prince in the *Bhagavad-Gita* ("Song of God") who hesitates before a battle against his cousins, the Kauravas, and is taught a lesson on duty and the immortality of the soul by the God Vishnu in the form of his friend and charioteer, Krishna.

Unlike Arjuna, Gopal cannot find a *guru* to guide him in the esoteric practice of Tantrism. Faced with the (postcolonial) problem of being unable to read Tamil, he has to

read English books on the subject, "three-quarters" of which he cannot comprehend. The root of his problem is half-baked knowledge about Tantrism, evident in his discriminatory and dualistic way of looking at the world, and therefore his attitude towards women (in contrast to the more knowledgeable and spiritually accomplished Swami Gomez, who is non-discriminatory). Gopal's main problem is not lust, but indecision: "when faced with choices he preferred not to choose" (55). From Hashim's point of view, Gopal has a "strange reticence" about sex and girls, which he interprets as "shyness and pretences" (69). There may be some truth in that because in Gopal's interaction with Mrs. K., one notes his lack of confidence, which he overcompensates for with male pride (57): "He must be in command. Never let any silly woman dominate a man." Not surprisingly, all these problems vanish once he finds his place in the world under the influence of Ganesh, Nila, Swami Gomez and a concoction of nectar, honey and incense laced with marijuana (86)—with some help from Inspector Hashim.

iii. One-pointed investigation of Mr. K

One of the first things the reader learns about Mr. K is his belief in self-honesty (4): "Admit and be cleansed. All those repressions did no one any good." The rest of his free indirect discourse is a subtle study of how someone with such a self-image deceives himself—and the reader. Fairly early in the text it is established that K. thinks of himself as a man of science and a total sceptic—one who "did not believe in anything anymore" (31). It is not until much later (113) that we discover he keeps in the glove compartment of his car a round stone, which he holds out to the "morning sun's rays for five minutes". This he does in imitation of a yogi he had observed during his childhood in Ceylon, who had told him about "the magical powers of the sun". He rationalises that his attachment to the stone has to do with his scientific mind, which allows him to see a kind of beauty in ugliness, like the "unity" in the "gait and stumbles" of a hunchbacked beggar. But the text has the last say; he hides the stone from his wife just as he hides the unscientific part of his nature from himself (114):

> And so with the stone he kept in the glove compartment of his Mercedes. It was not a beauty, lying there in the dark, but when one held it up to the sun it caught the shimmer and glowed with rainbow colours. And so he had slipped it in there without letting his wife know. He felt it could grow into a big diamond and that it would somehow protect him when he was driving.

There are other instances of how he glosses over truths about himself. He is acutely conscious that his relationship with his wife is not what it should be. For a brief moment he wonders if it is because of his sexual problem (29): “He did not know where the blame lay; perhaps it was the time when he could not satisfy her and she ridiculed him. He should have got that desensitizing cream and made love to her for a long-long time. But he had some pride in himself.” But he swiftly looks for other causes for the failing relationship (30): her having “become more and more interested in money” and her English education, which “made one so arid and selfish” because the “warmth and the tradition seemed to have been sieved off, leaving only struggling maggots of resentment and emptiness where the flesh should be”. By the time the novel nears its end (145), westernisation has been appropriated as the cause of his marital as well as most of the world’s problems:

> He had been so imbued with Western thoughts that his married life had been ruled by concepts of the latest demagogue ruling Western psychology. If somehow he could feel like the heroes or even the villains of some Indian epic, perhaps his marriage would have a chance. She would have to change also. But that was impossible, living as they did in the town. Any town, for that matter, in the world. They were all distorted by the disfigured reflection from the West.

This line of argument allows him to avoid the truth about his sexual dysfunction and to focus on the one area of activity where he is in full control, surgery; and the one area of thought where he can safely vent his discontent: criticism of the state of the nation. So it is mainly in K.’s free indirect discourse that we find echoes of contemporaneous socio-political complaints: the ill effects of colonialism and westernisation, the increasing inefficiency of the government services since Independence, corruption in high places, and the deteriorating standard of English among the younger generation.

With the one-pointed investigation of the spiritual and sexual aspects of Hung, Gopal, and Mr. K., I have ascertained that these three men suffer from some form of confusion over religious beliefs, and some form of psychologically or physically related sexual dysfunction. These factors make it difficult for them to relate to women either with non-discrimination, like Swami Gomez, or with confidence, like Hashim. I conclude that my KC1 Discourse Hypothesis has been validated. Therefore:

The KC1 Discourse is that there is a correlation between religious confusion, sexual dysfunction, and lack of ability to relate with people on equal terms on the one hand, and the disparagement of women on the other.

I shall now use the KC1 Discourse to discover new and hidden discourses.

7.5 THIRD READING: DISCOVERING NEW AND HIDDEN DISCOURSES

In the course of my one-pointed investigation of Hung, Gopal, and K., I notice that it is only in K.'s free indirect discourse that we find a venting of discontent over topical socio-political changes in Malaysia. This suggests that there is another discourse in the novel, one with wider, more topical, socio-political implications than the discourse on gender discrimination. Through its critical probe into the psychological factors involved in the habit of discriminating against others and putting them down, the text seems to be saying that our conflicts with others stem from our conflicts with ourselves; and our criticisms and the disparaging remarks we make of others are *prapanca* or "flowers in the sky" we create to avoid looking too closely at our own deficiencies. From this observation, I make my KC2 Discourse Hypothesis:

The KC2 Discourse is a critique of negative criticism of national issues.

I shall now validate it through a one-pointed investigation of episodes and characters' thoughts relating to socio-political issues.

7.5.1 KC2 Discourse: a critique of negative criticism

Earlier, when noting my conflicts with the text, I pointed out my discomfort with the divisive way socio-political issues are dealt with in the novel. Woven into the fabric of *Flowers*' fictional world, mainly through the thoughts of Mr. K. and Inspector Hashim, are issues that were topical at the time of the novel's first publications. Historically, during the second half of the 1970s, there was growing concern over the social side effects of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Language Policy (NLP) which were implemented in 1971. The main issues raised were the increasing polarisation among the different ethnic and religious groups, the falling standard of English among younger Malaysians, the brain

drain from the government services, intra-party political problems, and the number of people in public office seeking power for their own political ends or personal gain.[9]

Seen from a broad perspective, these issues were by no means peculiar to Malaysia. The 1970s saw a worldwide assertion of identity in terms of ethnic origin (exemplified by Alex Haley's best-selling novel, *Roots*), as well as an upsurge of religious fundamentalism which gave new meaning to the phrase "born again". Corruption among bureaucrats and politicians, money politics, falling educational standards, and brain drains are perennial problems everywhere. But in Malaysia there was a tendency to link these problems to the NEP and the NLP. The NEP, with its declared aim of increasing Bumiputera share of the economic cake through preferential treatment, had, as Rehman Rashid puts it, "divided Malaysians into first- and second-class citizens" (1994: 135); and the "second-class citizens" (i.e. the non-Bumiputera) were inclined to view both the NEP and the NLP as signs of Malay political, economic, and cultural domination. Discourse on these issues therefore took on divisively racial overtones. These overtones are particularly evident in Mr. K.'s free indirect discourse, who is the novel's principal social critic. The use of free indirect discourse to give an insight in Mr. K.'s mind serves to expose Mr. K.'s confused thinking and hypocrisy. However, it must be remembered that Mr. K. is only the author's "puppet", fabricated to expose the critical faults of the novel's target reader (the English-educated Malaysian).

In the following, I shall discuss how the text challenges Mr. K.'s criticism of racial polarisation, the language policy, inefficiencies in the government, and the abuse of power and political connections. It does so by presenting the historical and geographical perspectives on topical issues, as if to make the point that these issues have always existed here and elsewhere, and are not necessarily the result of social and economic restructuring.

i. Challenging criticism of racial polarisation

The historical and geographical perspectives on interethnic relations and racial polarisation are presented mainly through Hung's and K.'s recollections. The historical perspective is reflected in Hung's recollections of his early days in Malaya. He remembers that Ah Lan was loved by the local Malays, who wanted to adopt her (42), but that her father, Ah Pak, would not allow it because he did not want her to be a Muslim. On another occasion (40), Hung was curious about the Muslim call to prayer, and asked Ah Pak to take him to the

mosque, but was told that only the Muslims (i.e. Malays) ever enter it. Two points seem to be made here: one, that religion is more likely to put distance between people than race; and two, polarisation existed long before the NEP and the NLP.

The geographical perspective is provided in K.'s recollections of his days in Ceylon. Troubled by Ah Looi's death, K. recalls the Buddhist monks he used to see as a child in Ceylon (170), and regrets that he could never talk to them (presumably because of the language barrier, he being Tamil and the monks Singhalese); because if he had, "probably he would have understood what it was all about". Several points are being made here. One, it is not racial or religious differences that keep people apart, but ignorance, wrong assumptions, and the lack of will to make contact. Two, it happens in other countries. Three, it has nothing to do with the NEP and the NLP.

ii. Challenging criticism of the National Language Policy

In K. and Hashim we have two kinds of western-educated response to the language policy, non-Malay and Malay. I shall present Hashim's position first because it is more straightforward, and it will help to highlight the confused nature of K.'s position. For Hashim, the issue of language is related to the nation, and not race. He takes for granted the status of Malay as the national language and the enforcement of the NLP to promote its use. He is impressed by Mrs. K.'s "superb" command of Malay (71). He is annoyed by the ubiquity of Chinese signboards, which suggests a lack of respect for the language policy, but quickly suppresses his feelings with the reminder that he has to be more tolerant. His recognition of the need for tolerance is not entirely unselfish; he is aware that he cannot afford to antagonise the Chinese electorate if he is to succeed as a politician in the future. But it is also based on the principle of "live and let live", and the knowledge that time is required for change to take place (66).

K.'s position is that competency in a common language is necessary for efficiency in the workplace; and what he bemoans are the everyday inconveniences and occasional tragedies caused by the loss of effective communication during the changeover from English to Malay as the medium of education. He does not question the use of Malay as the medium of instruction (30). On the contrary, since he questions the value of a western education, and harbours the suspicion that it is the reason for his less than satisfactory married life (30, 145) his greater concern is that an education in Malay will make no real difference to the impact

of western influence. To him the new education system is "a mere translation of the English education system into another language" (30). Based on his own experience, he thinks that language is a matter that touches the individual at a visceral level: "In extreme moments of sex, one reverts to one's mother tongue" (9), forgetting that he has observed only a few minutes earlier that he is a Ceylonese Tamil who cannot speak Tamil (4). What comes across is that Mr. K.'s thinking is confused, possibly by his rationalisation that his problems with his wife have to do with the fact that she is English-educated in order to avoid facing the fact of his sexual dysfunction. (29-30)

But the text also presents scenarios that destabilise the nationalist argument that a common language is required for effective communication and harmonious social relations. Pek Sim manages to communicate with Ah Lan through sign language (140); and Ah Lan manages to make her feelings known through her drawings, her body language and her actions. The point being made seems to be that where there is a will to communicate, there is no necessity for verbal language at all; sign or body language will do just as well.[10] In contrast, Mr. and Mrs. K. have a communication problem even though they speak English. Mrs. K. and Gopal have the same problem. Hung cannot communicate with the head of the temple committee despite their common language. On the other hand, K. thinks that he has communicated with Hung despite the absence of a common language, when the irony is that in fact Hung has not understood him at all (172). This refusal to take a particular position or viewpoint is characteristic of Zen thought (see Chapter III, 3.4.2).

iii. Challenging criticism of inefficiencies in the government services

K.'s perception that Independence has made Malay bureaucrats "stand-offish" (52) is contradicted by DSP Ismail's courtesy; and his view that the government service is inefficient is contradicted by the prompt and effective action taken by the police force. More importantly, his jaundiced view of the government medical service is undermined by his hypocrisy where his own practice is concerned. He does not bother to acquire or use the latest surgical techniques (45), does not invest in the latest equipment (99), and routinely refers difficult cases to the government hospitals (101).

iv. Challenging criticism of the abuse of power and political connections

The text does not deny the use of party political connections to secure lucrative contracts and positions in the commercial sector. DSP Ismail's father was a government hospital assistant who has risen to a high position in political circles, won several franchises from the government, and is about to be made a Tan Sri (52). Hashim's cousin is married to a "fat slob" who was once a taxi driver but has since secured a high position in the banking business "through working with the right political party" (70). Hashim himself was promoted to Inspector "swiftly" due to the "National Policy"; got his position as head of a section of the riot squad on account of his being "a staunch supporter of the ruling party"; and can look forward to going far either in the police force or in politics because he has been "favourably reported to the Inner Circle" (64). Further, to resolve the conflict between Mrs. K. and the Ganesh devotees, he makes use of his personal friendship with the politician, G. Mahalingam who, in turn, brings his political power to bear on Mrs. K. Even Hung has used "considerable influence upon the Registrar and Inspector of Motor Vehicles" to obtain his special 666 registration plate for his Mercedes (176).

However, the text does refute two assumptions made by those who use the issue of corruption as an argument against the NEP. First, it refutes the assumption that the abuse of power is a post-Independence or post-NEP phenomenon. In the conflict between Hung and the temple committee, which took place during colonial times, the head of the committee, Chee Hooi, is reputed to have connections with the British "rulers of the land" (132). Secondly, the text refutes the assumption that abuse of power occurs only among those in public office and those who move in political circles. Mr. K. himself uses the fact that DSP Ismail's father had once been his subordinate in the government hospital to influence Ismail to give priority to his problem with the Ganesh devotees (51-2). Matron Q., who is in charge of purchasing supplies for the Marvellous Cure Centre, receives "a certain percentage" from the suppliers as compensation for her "industry" (95). Mr. and Mrs. K. attend cocktail parties in order to meet influential people. And in colonial times, when Hung was applying for the position of Head Monk in a more lucrative temple, Pek Sim secured the votes of the temple committee members by promising them regular payments from a part of the donations received by the temple (140-1).

From the above exposition of the text's treatment of issues relating to the national discourse on socio-political problems after the implementation of the NEP and the NLP, I

conclude that my KC2 Discourse Hypothesis has been validated. <u>The KC2 Discourse is thus identified as a critique of negative criticism of socio-political issues.</u>

- <u>Reflections on the KC1 and KC2 Discourses</u>

The KC1 and KC2 Discourses discovered and discussed so far are critical or deconstructive discourses. Their aim is to deliberately create fictional "puppets" (e.g. the epigraph, the gossipy narrator, and the characters) that mirror the viewpoints and echo the voices of bigoted, sexist and racist Malaysians for the purpose of exposing not only the absurdity of the pseudo-religious and pseudo-scientific justifications they use for their disparagement of others, but also the psychological problems, self-deception, and clinging to illusions that lie at the root of their negative criticism. The KC2 Discourse is perhaps the most "visible" of the novel's discourses, because most critics in the past have discussed the socio-political issues addressed in the novel (see Review of Past Reading, 7.6 below). It should be pointed out that in my Zen-based reading the discourse is not understood as a novelistic participation in the socio-political polemics of the day, but as an attempt to demolish the bases for the prejudiced attitudes and racially divisive views common in Malaysian social criticism. It undermines criticisms of the NEP and the NLP by showing that the same social problems have existed in the past, and exist in other countries. More importantly, it undermines the criticisms by exposing the bigotry, confused thinking, hypocrisy and self-interest of the critics (in this case, Mr. K.). In other words, it is a critique of the critics rather than a defence of government policies.

I shall discuss next what I regard as the soteriological discourses, discourses that offer solutions and resolutions to the psychological ills highlighted in the deconstructive discourses. These soteriological discourses are partly "hidden", first because of the indirect way the stories are told, and secondly because they are profoundly Zen, which means their significance may not be apparent to readers who do not have background knowledge of Zen. However, I had read *Flowers* many times in the past with some knowledge of Zen but without the Zen-based Reading Procedure, and never saw these discourses, or at least never saw them so clearly. Their discovery in this reading may thus be attributed to the use of the Procedure. What follows is a summary of the process of discovery.

7.5.2 KC3 Discourse: Personal conflicts caused by clinging to inherited fictions

The process of discovery begins with the problems I have with the story of Ah Looi, Mr. K.'s cancer patient who dies after bowel surgery. Basically, I have three problems. The first is the problem of fitting her story into the above identified discourses. The second is my personal discomfort with the strong hint of the mystical in her story. The third is the very indirect way her story is told. Two factors induce me to investigate the story more closely. The first is that from past personal experience of reading narratives by game-playing authors (e.g. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*) I suspect that the story's problematic nature is a signal that I am being thrown a puzzle-solving challenge. The second is that I want to test if the Zen-based Reading Procedure will enable me to solve the puzzle to my satisfaction (i.e. resolve my conflicts with the story). As my reading will show, Ah Looi's story is the critical crux on which the novel's discursive mode switches from the critical-deconstructive mode of the KC1 and KC2 discourses identified above to a therapeutic or soteriological mode played out in a relatively hidden set of discourses. Ah Looi, the one character that does not seem to fit in the feminist and the socio-political discourses is paradoxically the character that makes everything fit; for it is only by getting to the heart of her mystery that I have an insight into how the seemingly disparate and contiguous parts of the novel (e.g. Hung's story, Mr. K.'s story, and the Ganesh story) are connected, and find my resolution to the novel.

In reviewing my one-pointed investigation of the women characters (7.4.2), I noted that in contrast to the other women, who are generally portrayed as being strong, practical, and independent, Ah Looi's character comes across as a clinging, unemancipated woman who has structured her life around her husband. She lacks the independent spirit of Pek Sim and Mrs. K. At a Chinese New Year party, she chooses to converse with K., her guest, in Chinese, speaking through her husband who translates for her; and giggles behind her hand when K. smiles at her (148-149). In this way she is unlike Mrs. K., who impresses Hashim not only because of her superb command of Malay, but also because she is "well informed and not shy" (71). She also seems to lack Pek Sim's and Mrs. K.'s maternal instincts. It is "well known" (103) that she loves her husband more than her children, having had them only to please her husband (108).

Ah Looi's story also does not seem to fit in the socio-political discourse (KC4), which has been identified as a critique of negative criticism. Unlike Hung's story, Mr. K.'s

story, and the Ganesh story, her story does not appear to contain any evidence of interpersonal conflict. Ah Looi is devoted to her husband. She treats those who work for her (namely Savari, her gardener, and Bhutto, at one time her replacement gardener) with fairness and an even temper and inspires affection in them (103). As a terminal cancer patient, she wins the admiration of K. and the nurses by bearing her pain bravely and without complaint (46, 108). And she is not shown to be a critical kind of person.

My Key Conflict (KC3), where Ah Looi's story is concerned, is that it seems to contain elements of the paranormal. Tommy Kok, Ah Looi's husband, had died in an air crash during her stay in the clinic, and the news of his death has been resolutely kept from her by her family and the clinic staff. Yet soon after his death she has a relapse and starts having a recurring bad dream, which she had stopped having soon after her admission to the clinic. The impression given, through the thoughts of the clinic staff, is that she knew about his death by some paranormal means. I find this element of the paranormal problematic mainly because I do not expect a writer like Lee, who describes himself as a "sceptical Zen Buddhist with leanings towards Theravadaism", to treat this sort of proposition seriously—and yet Ah Looi's story is the most serious of the stories in the novel. My hypothesis is that there is somewhere in the text a rational explanation for Ah Looi's behaviour, which will be revealed through a one-pointed investigation of first, the events relating to the news of Tommy's death, and then of Ah Looi herself, with special reference to her dreams.

As in all one-pointed investigations in this Procedure, the use of the Principals and Satellites (P&S) Forensic Tool is implicit. In this investigation, the use of the 10-Timeframes (10T) is particularly important because the narrative does not strictly follow a chronological order in the reporting of events relating to Ah Looi and the news of the plane crash. Equally important is the 3-Perceptions (3P) Tool because we know Ah Looi only indirectly through the other characters' perceptions, which consist of a tangle of impressions, memories, associated thoughts, and subjective projections. And since my aim in this investigation is to demystify the apparently mystical, I have to adhere strictly to the Zen-based Procedure's third Reading Guideline ("prioritise the unambiguous") and the fourth Guideline ("prioritise logical analysis").

i. One-pointed investigation of events relating to news of Tommy's death

Logic tells me that the only person who would have dared to break the injunction not to tell Ah Looi about her husband's death would be Mr. K. himself. But the difficulty is that the text seems to be deliberately evasive as to whether Mr. K. himself told Ah Looi of Tommy's death. As soon as I come across what seems like an admission by K., certainty of knowledge is denied me by a statement suggesting other possibilities. An example of this yes-but-no tactic is this passage from Mr. K.'s free indirect discourse (98):

> And to think that poor Tommy had gone down in that plane crash, so suddenly. *Ah Looi had taken the news calmly, listened to what he was saying, though sometimes he caught her gazing silently at her reflection in the window pane.* Well, Ah Looi knew he had tried his best. *With the latest medicines and reading, he had attempted to stem the advance*. He knew that there were her children to be looked after. (Italics mine)

In this passage, the occurrence of the first italicised sentence immediately after K.'s thought of the plane crash leads me to think that "the news" is of Tommy's death. But the subsequent switch to thoughts of Ah Looi's cancer [second italicised sentence] leaves me wondering if the "news" may not be after all about her illness. Then, as if to settle my doubts, the next two references to the plane crash are given from the perspectives of Bhutto (105), and of the nurse who wrote Ah Looi's medical report (108-9). Both their accounts mention Ah Looi's devotion to her husband. As my tendency is to think that a devoted wife would not receive news of her husband's death with the calmness observed by K., this piece of information increases the likelihood that K.'s "news" refers to her cancer. When I then learn that despite the Matron's conspiracy of silence, changes in Ah Looi's behaviour and mental and physical states indicate that she knows about Tommy's death, I get the impression I am being led to think that she has come by this knowledge by paranormal means.

My earlier one-pointed investigation of Mr. K. (7.4.4.3) has alerted me to his unreliability as a source of unambiguous data because of his tendency to gloss over unpleasant or unacceptable truths about himself. So I have to rely on the 10T and the use of logic. With the aid of these critical tools, I begin to see new significance in K.'s reading of and reaction to the nurse's report as well as his subsequent indirect discourse. The report

states that during her stay in the clinic Ah Looi had had a reprieve from her bad dreams and been generally positive and hopeful of recovery: she “wants to be cured so that she could make her husband happy and see more smiles on his face” (108). Since Tommy’s death, however, she had gone into a “slight coma” and has started having her bad dreams again. She also does not talk much—not even when her sisters visit, according to Bhutto (103)—except about her dream.

It does not seem likely that K., who sees his patients every morning during his rounds and appears to take a special interest in Ah Looi, has not noticed the change himself. I therefore assume that his reading of the report—after the operation, be it noted—is not in order to get new information, but for some other purpose. Now, assuming he had told Ah Looi about Tommy’s death, and then noted the change in her, is he not likely to begin to have doubts about the wisdom of his action and even suffer pangs of guilt? If this is the case, his observation, as he pulls on his gloves just before the operation, that “his hands looked obscene in the gloves, reminding him of the faces of bank robbers hidden under nylon stockings, anonymous and threatening” (98), could be interpreted as a guilt-tinged thought rather than a purely whimsical notion. Can it be he feels that by telling Ah Looi about her husband’s death, he has robbed her of her peace of mind? Of significance, too, is what he does after reading the report (109):

> He sipped his drink and straightened his back to relieve the tension and stretched his arms high. *And then he brought his palms together in the form of a prayer and smelt the tips of his fingers. Antiseptic and bacteria free*. (Italics mine)

This is an iconic moment in the novel; and a moment of insight for me. I could imagine Lady Macbeth sniffing her fingers in the same way after trying to “sweeten” them with “all the perfumes of Arabia”. And I infer that K., like Lady Macbeth, realised that guilt is not so easily got rid of, for immediately following “antiseptic and bacteria-free” are the lines confirming his role as informant (109):

> Yes, he also remembered the discussion he had with Ah Looi on his morning rounds five days after the plane had crashed…. Bodies in bits dangling everywhere and no work for the surgeons. All peacefully dead. She had passed her fingertips between her eyebrows as though she was having a pain in her forehead when he walked in

> alone. He had asked his nurse and the matron to remain outside in the corridor. He wanted to see her alone.

Significant, too, is the fact that this segment of K.'s free indirect discourse closes with this sentence (112):

> She was preparing herself, he knew, meticulously for the day when she would not be around, sending for her lawyers and accountants and *re-doing her will twice*."

The give-away is the phrase "re-doing her will twice". Why would she have to re-do her will twice, unless the first time was on being told that her illness was terminal, when she would have made a will in favour of her husband; and the second time was on being told about her husband's death, when she would have re-done her will in favour of their children.

It seems reasonable to assume that K., being a friend of her husband, and knowing that "there were her children to be looked after", felt obliged to let her know the truth so that she could put her affairs in order. But this does not mean that he should not have doubts about whether by telling the truth, he was responsible for her physical and mental relapse. It is from this point onwards, after reading the nurse's report, that K. begins to brood on what he means by "honesty"—"Even if he had cheated in his struggle up the ladder, he was never damned in his work. He never falsified a report or lied to a patient or refused to admit his mistakes" (147). From my fresh perspective of K.'s role as bringer of bad news, this last sentence bears the ironical heart of the matter. He may never have lied to his patients but he now has to face the possibility that in the case of Ah Looi, not lying may have been a mistake. The text's presentation of his thoughts, which I experience as a deliberate yes-but-no tactic of evasion, is in fact a reflection of K.'s attempts to repress what troubles him most: the suspicion that his truth-telling has caused the return of Ah Looi's dream, her terror and her despair; that, like "the bank robbers hidden under nylon stockings" (98) of his imagination, he has robbed her of the last of the "five lucks the Chinese pray for"—a peaceful death (149).

Here I detect a Zen critique of the root problematic of all our problems—clinging (*upadana*). As mentioned earlier, one of the first things we know about K. is his declared principle of honesty. The issue being problematised here is whether K.'s clinging to this principle has any merit in the case of a dying woman, especially when, as the text shows us

through his free indirect discourse, he does not adhere to the principle when it concerns his own weaknesses and foibles. Yet, at the same time, this insight into K.'s mental suffering over the consequences of his telling Ah Looi the truth evokes compassion for the man and an understanding of his moral dilemma: what else could he have done, when he knew that if he did not tell Ah Looi and get her to write a new will, her children may lose their rights to the family property? Having de-mystified the element of the paranormal surrounding Ah Looi's knowledge of her husband's death, I shall now try to demystify the mystery of her dreams.

ii. One-pointed investigation of Ah Looi and her dreams

The main difficulty in this one-pointed investigation is that we never hear Ah Looi speak (as we do in the case of Mrs. K.) and we never know what she thinks (as we can with Pek Sim). Everything we know of Ah Looi is based on the conclusions drawn by the other characters from their encounters with her. In this way, the reader's relationship with Ah Looi is similar to the relationship with Ah Lan; but whereas Ah Lan expresses her feelings through her drawings, her actions, and through her laughter and tears, Ah Looi gives the people around her the impression that she keeps her feelings tightly under control. The nurse notes, for instance, that she does not talk much or complain about her pain (108).

The only time we "hear" Ah Looi speak is through K.'s recollection of what she has to say about her dream and her search for answers by praying at all manner of temples and shrines (110-111); and here her confusion about religious matters reminds me of Hung, Gopal, and K. Does she perhaps belong in the KC3 Discourse, defined as showing "a correlation between religious confusion, sexual dysfunction, and lack of ability to relate with people on equal terms on the one hand, and the disparagement of women on the other"? K. certainly sees similarities between her and himself, noting that she does not cry; not because she is incapable of crying but because, as he projects, she is like him in being unable to cry "for all to see" (112). Pek Sim is reminded by her of Ying Ching, a nun she used to know in China who is more or less a female version of Hung. From Pek Sim's description of Ying Ching (139-140), we know that she is struck by these aspects of Ah Looi's character: her need to be perfect, her lack of laughter, and her social isolation—"Aloofness clung to the ego". Perhaps the most significant observation comes from Bhutto, who remembers how she used to greet her husband when he came home in the evenings, and how (103) "the smile he [i.e. the husband] used to give her was just like the smile Mr. K.

had on his face when Bhutto gave him the orchid cutting"—significant because the encounter between man and wife is compared to the encounter between a master and a servant eager to please.

Can we interpret this obsequiousness observed by Bhutto as evidence of Ah Looi's disparagement of women turned on herself? It is a possibility. But low self-esteem alone does not explain her bad dreams and the circumstances surrounding their recurrence. Using the 10T Tool to track the dream, I find in the nurse's pre-operation report (108- 109) and in Mr. K.'s recollection (110) that it is a recurring dream of "a huge hand coming down from the ceiling and wanting to pull her up and through the roof", that she stopped having the dream after her arrival at the clinic, and that she started having it again after her husband's death (108-109). But at the time she speaks to Pek Sim about it, after the operation and on the evening of her death, the dream has become more horrifying for her, because it is of a "big boot coming down through the hole and pressing down on her neck until she could not breathe" (152), a description reminiscent of the statue of the God of War in Hung's temple (124).

The only rational explanation I can think of for this state of affairs is that Ah Looi was an abused wife, and terrified of her husband.[11] There is no direct textual evidence that Tommy Kok was an abusive husband. There are however suggestions that he was a less than ideal husband. In the nurse's report (108), we are told that, according to Ah Looi, he has a "fondness for gambling" and that he is "a good planner", which I am inclined to interpret as meaning that he is a controlling person. In K.'s thoughts of her, there are suggestions that her illness is not only unusual for a thirty year old Chinese woman—"one of those rare cases" (47)—but also has deeply psychological causes: "something in him told him that the corrosion in her had begun long before the physical signs appeared" (111). Even though he does not know her well personally (107), she affects him more than other patients in the same condition, and the reason seems to be that he knows or guesses the truth of her situation: "Knowing her husband, and knowing her and a bit about her family circumstances. … he suddenly felt as if he wanted to sit down by her side … to tell her that he too had so many problems and to confess to her how he felt so hopeless in so many things" (150). Significantly, the nurse records that her visitors are her three sisters and her parents; then adds "Also her husband", as if his visits were so infrequent that she has nearly forgotten about them.

The hypothesis that Ah Looi is an abused wife would explain her recurrent dream as the psychological outcome of the constant state of fear in which she lives and why, while Tommy was alive, she was not troubled by them during her stay in the clinic, when she was safely out of his reach. It would also explain why, when K. broke the news to her of Tommy's death, she took the news calmly; the victim of abuse can hardly be expected to regret the death of her abuser. But it does not explain her subsequent relapse and the return of her dream. The explanation for this, I submit, is found in the nature of her religious beliefs and in the nature of her dream.

Ah Looi tells K. that she prayed "but she did not know what she prayed for at times. She prayed at Chinese temples, Indian temples, wayside shrines, during festivals and on the birthdays of the gods." (111) Like most Chinese Malaysians who are not Christians, Muslims, or knowledgeable Buddhists, Ah Looi practises a folk religion which embraces "the practical aspects of every mainstream religion" (Kok 1997: 127). Chinese folk religion is based on the concept of the soul; and a concept of the next world as a "mirror image" of this world (*ibid*: 131). After death, the soul becomes a *gui* or malevolent spirit, which it remains until it has been judged and served its time in purgatory. In purgatory the soul is cleansed of its malevolence, after which it acquires the status of *shen* or purified spirit (*ibid*: 128-130).

That Ah Looi's dream recurs after she learns of her husband's death suggests that she no longer feels safe because, according to what I assume is her belief system, he has become a malevolent spirit unbounded by time and space. But far worse than that: if the next world is exactly the same as this one, life in the next world would be a continuation of the present one; and the fact that he has died before her means that there is no respite from the abuse because he will be waiting for her when she dies. Thus it is not death that she fears, but what will come after it (111): "She was not afraid to go. But the dark hole frightened her a lot." As she approaches death, the dream becomes more terrifying. She no longer dreams of hands reaching out for her, but of a huge leg "all hairy and with a big boot coming through the hole and pressing down on her neck until she could not breathe" (152). The similarity between this dream and the statue of the God of War (as it is presented in the novel) cannot be ignored. Both are images of cruelty and oppression. It also cannot be ignored that only Ah Lan, the deaf-mute, understands and empathises with Ah Looi's terror. But there is a difference in their responses. Ah Lan responds with a fighting spirit; from K.'s perspective, "her expression … was not that of a child in fright; it seemed to be compounded

of dread and a fierce desire to destroy" (153). Ah Looi, on the other hand, thinks of it as punishment from either God or the devil; even though she knows that she has done no one harm (152). I am inclined to interpret her despairing acceptance of arbitrary cruelty as a symptom of being the subject of habitual abuse.

- Reflections on the KC3 Discourse

My reading of Ah Looi's story has resolved my conflicts with the novel at several levels. I am now satisfied that Ah Looi is not a saintly figure with supernormal knowledge, but rather a victim of not only her husband, but of her culture and its myths. From this new perspective I can see how, as the story of a victim of discrimination, her story is connected to the KC1 Discourse (that men who lack spiritual and psychological integrity have a negative attitude towards women); she is the test-case victim giving the novel's feminist discourse its moral dimension. Ah Looi's psychological profile places her directly in the KC1 Discourse. All the "faults" that we find in Hung, Gopal, and K., are replicated in Ah Looi, the disparaged female. We can even draw a parallel between her cancer, Hung's hernia and K.'s "bilateralism in his personality" (106). The moral is clear. Disparaging remarks, repeated often enough, become malignant socio-cultural and socio-political myths. These myths become internalised by the victims of disparagement, perpetuating the cycle of religious ignorance, spiritual confusion, repression of truths and self-truths, low self-esteem, and social alienation.[12] The logical outcome of the KC1 Discourse is the KC2 Discourse, the critique of negative criticism. For such is the influence of myths—"flowers in the sky"—on the individual's mind, self-perception, and well-being, that they "overturn the perfect and pure Enlightened Mind and cause wrong thinking", as is said in the *Surangama* (Lu, *ibid*: 163). But Ah Looi's story has another discourse, which I shall itemise here as the KC4 Discourse, without going into too great detail since most of the salient points have been covered.

7.5.3 KC4 Discourse: The use of therapeutic fictions

Ah Looi's story also deals with the issue of whether it is possible to live without "flowers in the sky". Ah Looi, the dying woman is the test-case; and Mr. K.'s moral dilemma has to do with his having to decide when to tell the truth, regardless of its effect on the dying, for the sake of her children; and when to say fictions will do no harm, as when he accedes to Ah Looi's request for the presence of Pek Sim and Ah Lan. In the end, his decision was a good one, because it is through the therapeutic fictions of Pek Sim and Ah Lan that Ah Looi goes

to her death without too much fear. The lesson that the rationalist K. has to learn is to not cling to the principle of truth at all times. Since things are neither real nor unreal, there is a time for “truth”-telling and a time for letting people live with their fictions. The art of living lies in knowing when is the right time for either. This insight is connected to the KC5 Discourse, played out in the Ganesh episode.

7.5.4 KC5 Discourse: Conquest of fictions to end social conflicts

The idea that fictions are part of the human condition is developed in the Ganesh episode, where we see a tri-partite clash of convictions/fictions involving Mrs. K., Swami Gomes and Inspector Gopal. Here the discourse (KC5) is not about whether we should have fictions; it is about knowing when and how to use fictions in conflict situations. As was explained in Chapter IV (4.4.5), to be enlightened in Zen terms is to have such a deep insight into the nature of fictions that one can see through the fictions of the conventional world and at the same time know how to use them without becoming attached to them—always for the sake of others and to bring an end to conflict. One is then a *bodhisattva* (a wisdom being), a conqueror of fictions.

In the Ganesh episode, this role of *bodhisattva* is accomplished by Inspector Hashim. Hashim is not chaste, but he accepts his sexuality and therefore does not discriminate against women on account of their gender. He is capable of feeling annoyed, but he can also reason away his annoyance. These qualities do not make him a *bodhisattva* in the conventional sense. But certain phrases used in the text to describe Hashim’s history suggest (to the reader familiar with Zen texts) that we are intended to see Inspector Hashim as a kind of *bodhisattva*. We are told, for instance, that the *bomoh* in his *kampung* had told him he has two career choices to make, both of which would lead him to success (64). Those familiar with the hagiography of Gautama Buddha will be reminded that when he was born a sage told his father that he had two choices: he could choose to be a world ruler, or a world teacher. We are also told that Hashim showed “tact” in his handling of a riot in Market Square (64); and “tact” or “tactfulness” is sometimes used as the English equivalent of *upaya* (“skill-in-means”, Ch. *fang-pien*), the special skill *bodhisattvas* have of combining wisdom and compassion to do what is appropriate or expedient to achieve soteriological ends (see Bunno Kato 1980: 51*fn*).

In his encounter with the formidable Mrs. K., Hashim, too, is unable to persuade her to be more compromising. The situation places him in a quandary, torn between his duty to disperse the crowd and his fondness for Inspector Gopal, whose partiality to the devotees is obvious to him. He also realises that his squad of Red Helmets is insufficient in the event of a riot, but is reluctant to call for reinforcements because it would be seen by his colleagues in the force as an "admission of failure on his part" (92). However, observing the devotees' religious fervour, he sees an "opportunity to compromise". He remembers from this training the dictum (93): "One thing that was untouchable in this country … was religion. … Students in a riot could be bashed, so too any demonstration that had any character of social protest. But not religion. That was taboo."

Generally, then, he sees things clearly and logically, but also humanely. The passage indicating the moment when he sees through the illusions of the world is this (76):

> On the highly polished surface of the table, reflections of white clouds massed above dark mountains on the opposite shore moved gently from the spot where his hand rested, and then he noticed his image superimposing itself on the clouds. Not clear, but seemingly floating along with the clouds. He watched his own eyes. They looked very dark in the reflections.

His moment of *prajna*-insight, so to speak, is very indirectly stated, but the metaphors used include those frequently used in Zen texts to describe the illusionary and ephemeral nature of things; among them clouds, reflections in the mirror, mirages, and echoes (see Ch. IV, 4.2.2). I shall have slightly more to say about Hashim's ability to see through fictions in my discussion of the next discourse. For the moment, I shall merely point out the altruism of his act, which is indicated in the report that the credit for resolving the conflict "fell on Gabriel Mahalingam" (94).

7.5.5 KC6 Discourse: the "hidden" discourse

The Ganesh episode raises a new Key Conflict (KC6) and a new discourse. I have noted that Hung and K. are hardly changed at the end of the novel. Hung drives off in his Mercedes, blissfully blind to his own inner corruption. K. reaches a truce with his wife by making an apology, which he "in his mind tried to convince himself that he sincerely did not mean it" (176). He knows that peace will eventually come, "when he would utter the first syllable,

and then *pretend* everything was back to normal". The irony is of course that the act of pretending that things are back to normal makes everything go back to normal; but K. is too attached to his fiction, that he would never "really" give in to his wife's demands, to see that. Gopal, on the other hand, is able to shake off his confusion over what he wants to do with his life and becomes a priest of Ganesh. Why is it that Gopal manages to solve his problem and Hung and K. remain unchanged, both in terms of their life situation as well as their self-knowledge? The answer lies in the "hidden discourse", which is found in the novel's structure and its treatment of time and place. It is worth looking into these topics a little more closely because Lee's use of these narrative categories (time and place) is non-European.

The three events in *Flowers* bring together a broad spectrum of characters, revealing the economic, social, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity of Malaysian society. This convergence of people and events in a relatively unified time and space brings to mind Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope (or time-space) as the "formally constitutive category" that defines the European novel's "genre and generic distinctions", and determines "to a significant degree the image of man in literature" (*Holquist* 1988: 85). In *Flowers*, we have most of the symptoms described by Bakhtin in his typology of chronotopes: the chance encounters of "representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages … normally kept separate by social and spatial distance" typical of the chronotope of the road (*ibid*: 243); the "weaving of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life, with the secrets of the boudoir; the interweaving of petty, private intrigues with political and financial intrigues" typical of the chronotope of parlours and salons (*ibid*: 247); the openly impolite expression of all "unofficial and forbidden spheres of human life, in particular the sphere of the sexual and of vital body functions" that is the special province of the clown or fool, typical of the chronotope of the *entr'acte* or theatrical interval (*ibid*: 163; 165-6); and the crisis events—"the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man"—marking the chronotope of the threshold (*ibid*: 248).

But the attempt to fit *Flowers* into any of these chronotopes, the plot-generating bases of the European novels discussed in Bakhtin's essay, merely serves to highlight the non-Europeanness of Lee's novel. This is not because the *loci* of action in *Flowers* are a medical centre and a private garden; it is understood that the chronotope is essentially symbolic and metaphorical. It is primarily because in *Flowers*, it is neither the place nor the

element of time that is the “dominant principle” in giving rise to the convergence of characters and events necessary for the generation of a plot. It is rather the reverse; it is singular events and the convergence of characters that give symbolic value to the locations of the action, and give meaning to time.

First, the place of action: It is the arrival of a Buddhist monk seeking physical healing that gives the Marvellous Cure Centre its symbolic value as (a) a place for the ironic exposition of, amongst other things, a monk who has problems with his sexual needs and a physician who has problems with his spiritual needs; and (b) a threshold of spiritual and psychological significance for a dying woman who finally finds the peace she has long searched for; ironically, not from the monk, but from his sister, a laywoman whom she mistakes for a nun, and her deaf-mute assistant. And it is the appearance of a statue of Ganesh that transforms K.’s garden, usually a symbol of idyllic solitude, into (a) a public square, the site of a carnivalesque challenge to—and eventual restoration—of the everyday structure of power and authority; and (b) a threshold where life-changing crises, decisions, epiphanies, and renewals are experienced by Mr. and Mrs. K., DSP Ismail, PC 2168 (the jealous husband), Inspector Gopal, Nila, Swami Gomez, Inspector Hashim, G. Mahalingam, and the crowd of devotees.

Next, the element of time, a more complex issue: In *Flowers* one is made aware of time in its various manifestations. There is first of all quotidian time; the narrative is divided into segments not by chapter headings but by the hour and the day, reminding us of the passage of time. There is biographical time, which we are made aware of by Hung’s and K.’s recollections of their past, and also by third-person accounts of the lives of the other characters. There is historical time; details of topical socio-political issues that preoccupy the characters, and real events (e.g. the passenger plane crash in which Ah Looi’s husband died) set the novel in a particular time in the nation’s history. There is also dramatic time, which makes an appearance in the Ganesh episode. The conflict between Mrs. K. and the crowd centres on her refusal to let the devotees remain in her garden until sunset, which Swami Gomez deems the propitious time for the removal of the statue.

There are however three points to be made about the nature of time in *Flower*. First, it does not serve an overall dramatic function, in the sense that there is nothing crucial, inevitable or fateful about the fact that all three events should happen together during this short span of time. Thus although time has a dramatic function in the Ganesh episode, and

although the episode itself is dramatic in that it changes the lives of the characters involved, the event is neither affected by nor does it affect the development or outcome of the two other events. As has been noted, in terms of the plot (as opposed to discourse) the three strands of the narrative are contiguous rather than organically connected, so that time does not have a unified metaphysical, metaphorical or a plot-generating value.

Secondly, time is the dimension in which events take place, and clock-time is the method of measuring change. But its value as a measure of change is important and relevant only to the individual who is conscious of it. I have mentioned that the narrative segments are divided by notations of the hour and the day. But the notations are not in strict sequence. The third segment, for instance, starts at 5.00 a.m. Thursday, when Hung is roused from his drugged sleep (9); but the segment following that takes us back to 2.00 a.m. Thursday, when K. is awakened from sleep in his bedroom (24). Closer examination shows that throughout the text, each notation of time is followed by the indirect discourse of either Hung or K. The explanation that suggests itself is that the time notations are not substitutes for chapter headings, but are in fact part of the characters' indirect discourse. They indicate the time noted by the characters when they momentarily glance at a clock or a watch—an action that may be a habit (113): "when [K] woke up his Rolex watch showed six". This then triggers a stream of conscious thought. That is to say, the purpose of the time markers may not be either to divide the narrative into segments or to record the chronology of events, but rather to indicate that the two men use clock-time to structure their lives, as most people do.

In connection with these ideas, it is worth noting that there are three segments of narrative time left unrecorded by this device of noting the hour and day. The first is the opening segment, where we find the anaesthetised Hung on the operating table, sinking into unconsciousness—therefore oblivious to time. The second is the Ganesh episode, which is brought into the narrative without any time-marker. The only signal separating the episode from K.'s preceding indirect discourse is the narrator breaking in with "What Mr. K. failed to realize …" (53) and taking over the narration. From then on the whole affair is reported without time-markers, even though it takes up a good part of the day, consists of a variety of incidents and histories of the main characters, and—most significantly—is centred on a conflict over time, namely the Swami's deadline. The explanation submitted here is that everyone at the scene is so involved in the battle of wills that they lose consciousness of time. The one person who is aware of the passage of time and how it can affect a person's perspective on things is Inspector Hashim; and he uses it to clinch the diplomatic coup he

has achieved with the help of G. Mahalingam. Counselling Mrs. K. to give in with good grace, he reminds her, "with a shrug", that "the crowd would be here for no more than five more hours" (93). The third non-occurrence of time-markers is the narrative gap between 7.00 a.m. Friday and 10.00 a.m. Monday—presumably because it is the weekend, when clock-time is unimportant.

The third point is that the time has no intrinsic value; only a perceived value that has meaning only to the perceiver. For Hung and K. time has value as a device for structuring their daily lives; but there is also a sense that they see time as a measure of their past survival through difficulties and the achievement of their goals and missions. For K., as a medical man, the value of time is also related to life and health; and his sense of helplessness vis-à-vis Ah Looi has to do with the fact that he is unable to give her that time. In the Ganesh episode, the conflict between the Swami and Mrs. K. has to do with different perceptions of time. For Swami—and for Gopal and the other devotees—time has a metaphysical value; but for Mrs. K. time is related to a principle about property, territorial privacy, and ultimately her ego and will to assert her rights and authority. Here, again, Inspector Hashim stands out as an exception. In contrast to Hung and K., the value he places on his biographical time is in its future: what the passing of time, together with his efforts, will bring him in terms of success. (This is due in part to his youth and in part to the fact that he is Malay and can depend on the opportunities made available to him through the NEP.) Thus, in contrast to Mrs. K. and the devotees, he sees time in realistic terms: in relation to change. These various perceptions of time show that in the text the value of time is a mental construct.

The aim of this analysis is not to refute Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope. The aim is to show that in its treatment of time and space, *Flowers* is distinctly different from the European novel, which is the subject of Bakhtin's discussion. In Lee's novel it is not the fusion of place and time that generate the plot, but the convergence of events and people that give place and time their metaphysical and metaphorical values. Following Bakhtin's theory, then, if the chronotope is the "formally constitutive category" that defines the "generic distinctions" of a novel and the "image of man in literature", we should expect that both the generic distinctions and the image of man presented in *Flowers* would be distinctly different from those of the European novel. And so they are. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotopic man (the man bound by time and place) is depicted in the characters like Hung, K., and Ah Looi, who are trapped in their constructs of time and place. But the *bodhisattva-*

hero, depicted in Hashim, is one who has conquered the fictions of time and place to make every time and every place a “paradise”.

This explanation of the treatment of time and place in *Flowers* helps establish the discourse “hidden” in the way the narrative is structured. First, the Ganesh episode takes place in the novel’s “present” and all the characters are acting out their “realities” in the “momentary here and now”, which is always the time and place for a *bodhisattva* (who could be anybody, since, from the Zen perspective, we are all potential Buddhas) to come along and bring about change. This is the core discourse. Surrounding this episode are the recollections of Hung and K., who are not only conscious of structured time, but basically live in the past. These two older men live entirely in their memories and have no real contact with their inner selves, the people they are surrounded by, and the reality of their present. Their stories form the “dry husk” for the Ganesh incident, in which the lively, life-affirming core discourse is played out. In other words, the reason that the two men do not change (compared with Gopal) is that they cling to their past and do not care to change.

This insight into the “meaning” of the narrative structure gave me a new perspective on what had appeared to me as a case of racial and religious bias at the First Reading, when I noted that the Ganesh incident is treated as a comedy, while the conflict between Hung and the temple committee over the placement of the God of War statue is treated with seriousness. A closer reading comparing Hung and Swami Gomez as religious leaders and the problems they faced in establishing themselves in their careers reveals first that religion is essentially a commercial enterprise, and that priests and monks have to be businesslike if they wish to succeed. Secondly, the comparison shows up the difference between Hung and the Swami as religious men. Hung, who clings to the memory of his life in the Chinese monastery, is contemptuous of his benefactor, the pig farm owner. He refuses to deal with him, leaves the negotiations to Pek Sim, and chooses to remain ignorant of the corruption involved in the deals she makes to ensure his comfort and success. The Swami, on the other hand, comes across as a man of greater spiritual integrity; he is not a “self advertising” guru, and although his faith is sorely tried by his adversity, he does not lose it. Finally, when I compare the two religious events, I note that at the ceremony for the installation of the God of War statue the description of the congregation reveals a discrimination against the poor farmers and the women in favour of the merchants (124). In contrast, in the Ganesh episode, the crowd is democratic, enthusiastic, and full of faith. What seems to be a comedy at first is in fact a celebration of spontaneous expression of faith and awareness of being blessed.

7.5.6 Conclusion to the Third Reading

The Third Reading has brought to light the "playful" way Lee Kok Liang brings serious issues to the reader's attention. This is made obvious in the epigraph. Two sentences from a Buddhist text, fairly benign in their original context, are juxtaposed in such a way that they seem not only provocative but also of immediate relevance in the contemporary world. This "fabrication" of a scriptural text is then used in the novel to expose the fictions surrounding the male chauvinistic attitude towards and treatment of women. This "puppet-kill-puppet" technique is followed through in the narrative, where fictional props (e.g. the gossipy narrator and the characters) are created to mirror the viewpoints and echo the voices of bigoted, sexist, and racist Malaysians for the purpose of exposing the baselessness of all their assumptions (or "flowers in the sky") to shore up discriminatory and divisive social and political discourse among Malaysians. This exposure of the baselessness of negative criticism and disparagement of others on the basis of gender, religion and race is done on the surface with the use of irony and almost vulgar humour, reflecting the voices of ordinary Malaysians; but at the deeper level, they explore the psychology of overly critical minds, to reveal that those who indulge in negative criticism and discriminatory disparagement of others are usually confused and suffering from some kind of psychological or sexual dysfunction, symbolised by, for instance, K.'s sexual impotence and Hung's hernia.

The second aspect of the novel that engages my attention is the even-handedness with which it launches its critical-deconstructive discourses. Every issue is presented in such a way that the reader is able to see both its negative and its positive aspects. Thus the fabricated nature of gender- and religion-based arguments for the disparagement of women is challenged by the portrayal of women as strong, intelligent, nurturing and independent; but one seemingly unemancipated woman, Ah Looi, stands out as a challenge to the challenge. The suggestion that men who disparage women are psychologically and/or physically dysfunctional in some way is balanced by the portrayal of men who do not disparage women as spiritually and psychologically whole. Here, too, Ah Looi, the unemancipated woman, is shown to share all the psychological ills of the men who disparage women, even to the point of being self-disparaging, challenging the view that it is only men who are guilty of treating women badly. The critique of negative socio-political critics is balanced by a portrayal of the country's past and present showing there is another, broader-minded way of looking at contemporary socio-political issues. However, the existence of socio-political ills is not denied; nor is it assumed that any simple solution, be it

good will or a single-language policy, can bridge the gulf between people of different ethnicities and with different histories of migration and settlement in the young country.

Of particular interest is that the set of critical-deconstructive discourses (KC1 and KC2), which lie close to the surface of the text, are balanced by a set of therapeutic or soteriological discourses (KC3, KC4, KC5 and KC6) lying at a deeper level. Just as one has to solve the puzzle of the epigraph to access the critical-deconstructive discourses, so one has to solve the mystery of Ah Looi's story to access the soteriological discourses. Ah Looi, the character, presents a challenge to those inclined to see the world in terms of male-female, good-bad dichotomies. Her story is the novel's critical crux, the solving of which allows the reader to see how all the discourses and other aspects of the narrative are connected to one another. The solving of this critical crux requires some knowledge of Ah Looi's Chinese religious and cultural background; and the understanding of the soteriological discourse unveiled by the solving of the critical crux requires some knowledge of Lee's Zen worldview. But because the message is Zen, it is also simple: our mental fictions or "flowers in the sky" are part of the human condition; and the smartest way of living with them is first, to know that they are fictions, and then to know when to use them and when to abandon them for the sake of ending personal and social conflicts.

Lee's profoundly Zen worldview, especially as it relates to concepts or time and place, has an impact on the novel's structure. The placement of the comedic Ganesh episode at the centre of the narrative, surrounded by the ruminations of Hung and Mr. K., brings to mind the image of a coconut. Embedded in this structure and in the techniques of narration is the soteriological answer to the issues of nation-building and national harmony. We can choose, like Hashim, the enthusiastic devotees of Ganesh, and eventually Gopal, to live in the present, respond with integrity to the reality of the momentary now, and be the vital kernel of a fruit; or we can choose, like Hung, and K. to live in the past, cling to memories and faded dreams, and be the dry and useless husk.

Flowers is a socio-political discourse, but this Zen-based reading of *Flowers* may give us a better understanding of what Lee meant by "politics" in his 1991 address to writers at a conference in Singapore, where he suggested (quoting Chekhov) that writers "embrace politics in order to negate politics" (Fadillah Merican et al., 2004: 70).

> We [writers] blame politicians, we ridicule bureaucrats, we avoid the establishment. Partly it is because we feel that the politicians want us to write what they want us to. We feel that the bureaucrats can never understand us. We think of the establishment as being bourgeois, money-grabbers and unsympathetic. …And yet perhaps the fault lies in ourselves: we do not—what was it that Chekov wrote—'embrace politics in order to negate politics'.

7.6 COMPARING PAST READINGS OF *FLOWERS IN THE SKY*

The intention of this review of past readings of *Flowers* is to give an idea of the differences between the outcome of the Zen-based Reading Procedure and those of readings by other critics. The main concern is to highlight where the outcomes of past readings diverge significantly from the outcome of the Zen reading.

7.6.1 Review of Past Readings

No detailed or in-depth study has been made of *Flowers* to date although a number of critics have discussed it. The earliest article included here is S.C. Harrex "Scalpel, scar, icon: Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*" (1982, reprinted in Quayum & Wicks 2001: 174- 183). According to Harrex, the novel "charts the process of corruption that accompanies transplantation of old cultural traditions in a new environment". In his view Hung's biography is the "core story", and Mr. K.'s biography is its parallel; the two men representing "aspirants at opposite ends of a human scale with the monk symbolising spiritual man and K. representing sensual man". The Ganesh episode and Ah Looi's story are regarded as the "sub-plots". At the same time, Gopal's Tantric path to spiritual bliss is a foil for Hung's more austere path; and where the Ganesh episode "celebrates the comedy of life", Ah Looi's fear of death "calls attention to human tragedy in a common guise". Noting the fundamental importance of religion in the novel, Harrex views Lee's comparison of religious value systems in terms of "what they may have to offer modern man" and in terms of the need for mutual accommodation in multi-cultural societies. He identifies the source of the epigraph as the *Surangama Sutra*, and "the profound peace of Nirvana" of "the flowers in the sky" (Quayum & Wicks 2001: 182). This is a fundamental error, which I have pointed out in my reading.

Abdul Majid bin Nabi Baksh's 1984 article is a study of theme and technique in *Flowers*. He notes Lee's use of indeterminacies and suggests that they represent the inconclusive nature of life, which in turn allows creative and critical interpretations of life. Abdul Majid holds the view that Lee uses this technique as a means of holding the reader's attention with the promise of "revelation in the near future".

From the second half of the 1980s onwards, criticism of the novel begins to take on a postcolonial theoretical flavour, focusing on the theme of cultural conflict. John Barnes's "The fiction of Lee Kok Liang" (first published in 1985, Reprinted in Quayum, M. A. & Wicks, P.C. (eds.) 2001: 184-190) shares Harrex's view that the "contrasts and parallels between the man of religion and the secular man are central to the pattern of the work". Hung is thus "innocent of the corruption of the world", as opposed to the shrewd and "worldly-wise" Pek Sim, and the rich merchants who own the temple. At the same time, however, Ah Lan "lives in a state of incorruptible innocence such as neither the monk nor the surgeon can every wholly know" because the latter two are "part of the corrupt and imperfect world". Barnes is however of the opinion that the religion-secularism tension is not the whole pattern of the novel, because all the characters have to be seen "in the context of a communally divided society". Barnes interprets the fact that Hung and K. can communicate with each other only either through an interpreter or mime as reflective of how ethnic communities are "separated by seemingly unbridgeable differences of speech, custom and belief". He notes that tensions exist not only between races but also within the single individual (e.g. K.'s conflict between the traditional values of his family and his Western education) and within the same family or community. His article therefore is a study of "the tensions and divisions … embedded in Malaysian society".

Sharilyn Wood's "Silence, communication and cultural conflict in Lee Kok Liang's *Mutes in the sun* and *Flowers in the sky*", first published in 1988 (reprinted in Quayum & Wicks, 2001: 191-203) basically summarises the views of all previous critiques. A few points to highlight the divergences from my reading: Wood accepts as the central message the blurb on the novel's back cover, namely that it is "first of all to emphasise the flesh's vulnerability and second to reinforce the idea that those who think and feel too much must also suffer too much". The themes she identifies are the "physical versus the spiritual, middle-class materialism versus traditional religious belief, and sickness, suffering and death". She notes the time markers, but regards them as titles to the novel's "thirteen divisions of varying lengths" which are held to be a "clear chronology" of events.

Postcolonial themes are highlighted: the immigrant world, the multi-racial community, the linguistic and cultural diversity, and the "fragmentary or incomplete" communication among the characters. She concludes that the novel "holds forth future possibilities for a unified linguistic community in Malaysia while revealing how far there is yet to go before they can be fully realised."

Shirley Lim's "Gods Who Fail: Ancestral Religions in the New Literatures in English from Malaysia and Singapore", first published in 1988 (reprinted in Quayum & Wicks 2001: 126-135) picks up from where Harrex left off by focusing on the "relativism of religious belief". She diverges, however, from Harrex's more humanistic approach by suggesting that Lee, in treating Gopal's religious experience as a comedy, makes transparent a "second", political motive for making use of religion. For her, then, the novel is an "attempt to overcome the suspicions and rigidity of one-race-consciousness through a focus on cultural relativism" in the context of "Malaysian racial divisions". And Lee's use of religion is viewed as a way of avoiding "the whole issue of national identity which, after all, is the ideology of exclusion". Lim's essay therefore sites the novel in the midst of the socio-political polemics of the nation. Incidentally, she mistakenly identifies the source of the epigraph as the *Lotus Sutra*, which may perhaps be taken as an indication that her interest in the novel lies more in the role it is perceived to play in postcolonial political polemics than in the way it deals with "ancestral religions".

K.S. Maniam's "*The mutes in the sun* and *Flowers in the sky*: a relative view" (1993) describes the novel as Lee's attempt to "dramatise the conflict between materialist and spiritual values". However, in Maniam's view, Lee "does not successfully resolve this two-way stretch in a man's life". According to Maniam, the movement of the story is an "hourglass of coincidence", where it begins with Hung representing the spiritual and Mr. K. the materialistic; and ends with Hung representing "corruption" and Mr. K. "idealism". This criss-crossing is deemed necessary, "maybe even inevitable, for "the initiation into new forms of understanding". Quite how the text achieves this is not discussed by Maniam, for whom the novel is a portrayal of man's attempts to "break down the limits imposed on him by society, accepted philosophical attitudes, individual ideas of self-image and spiritual rigidity". He also suggests that Lee sees Malaysian life as "bifurcated, fragmented, and sometimes even atomised" and that the novel's message is that it is possible to "enlarge the dimensions of man's dignity", but then, political, social, and communal concerns must "give way to the healthy development of an integrated, inclusive mode of perception"; since the

breaking down of inhibitions is more important that "an insistence on formal, exclusive correctness".

Wong Phui Nam's "Inventing the Nation" (1996) echoes the postcolonial and diasporic themes, focusing on Hung and K. as representatives of Malaysia's immigrant communities, the compromises they had to make in contributing to the "inventing" of the nation, and the contrast between K's "sensuality" and Hung's spirituality. Interestingly, he views Hung's burning his chest as an act of "heroism".

Kirpal Singh's "Transcending Context: The World of Lee Kok Liang's Fiction", first published in 2000 (reprinted in Quayum & Wicks 2001: 204- 211), is a survey of Lee's fiction. The article reasserts Lee's Buddhist-Hindu, non-judgmental, and compassionate outlook, claiming that the novel indicts "all who would have us believe that fixed worldviews are necessary for our spiritual well-being". However, the article does not provide a study of *Flowers* in any depth.

Mention should be made of two articles which I was unfortunately unable to get copies of. They are Woon-Ping Chin's "Children of the Chinese Diaspora: A Comparison of Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*" (1991) a reading of *Flowers* as part of the literature of the Chinese Diaspora; and Koh Tai Ann's "Tradition and Modernity in the Fiction of Lee Kok Liang and Catherine Lim: Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese Perspectives" (2002), which approaches the *Flowers* as a cultural text.

7.6.2 Comparison of Past Readings and the Zen-based Reading

The review of past readings shows that the Zen-based Reading Procedure has produced an outcome that diverges sharply from most other critics' understanding of *Flowers.* As with the Zen-based reading of *Scorpion,* what this reading demonstrates is that the Procedure facilitates or enforces a reorientation, which enables the opening up of new areas for further investigation, which may or may not involve the use of western and other-cultural theories. A major factor is of course that I have approached the novel with background knowledge of Zen. But the knowledge of Zen is attributable to the Procedure, which demands of the reader the close attention to detail and thoroughness of reading and research required for the achieving of insights into the peculiarities of the text and the implications of these

peculiarities. Considering that past critics have not had my advantage, a point-by-point comparison of reading outcomes would not be fair, and I shall not attempt it. In the following, I shall only discuss broadly the areas where the outcome of my reading differs from the outcomes of past readings.

As was found in the review of past readings of *Scorpion*, there has been a tendency among past critics to assume that *Flowers* is engaging in the cultural contestations that colour post-1970 socio-political discourses in Malaysia. Although some critics (e.g. Harrex and Kirpal Singh) acknowledge that the novel is making a plea for cultural relativism and greater tolerance, none has reached the conclusion that I reached in the Zen-based reading: that the novel is not critiquing the government policies so much as the critics who indulge in negative and divisive criticism of the policies; and that what it is advocating is the end of conflict by realising that all the reasons we bring to bear on our criticism are but "flowers in the sky", and that we should respond intelligently to present change rather than yearn for the past. It is impossible to gauge to what extent past critics have reached their conclusions because they have assumed that the narrator's voice is the author's voice. A slight diversion here may be necessary to explain why it is very likely.

The narrator in *Flowers* is not what is usually termed an "unreliable" narrator, because he (I am assuming it is a "he" because of the male chauvinistic tone) is not necessarily untruthful. On the contrary, he is painfully truthful; he is telling us about events in a voice that Malaysians recognise because we hear it every day. As a narrative device, the narrator gives the reader the vantage point of a fly-on-the-wall in, say, the drinking bar of a men's club. It is our own "private" voice, the voice we use when we are alone or among those with whom we feel we can let our guard down and forget about being politically correct. To recognise its fabricated nature one has to know something of Zen philosophy, or Chinese philosophy, or perhaps Sufi literature; because the narrator's disenchanting honesty seems to be modelled on the "naïve" fool who shows us exactly what we are and confronts us with our foolishness. The narrator is another one of Lee's "puppets", which, like the epigraph, has been constructed to expose the absurdity of the mind-constructed "puppets" we give voice to. This is why the concept of the *dalang* or puppeteer is a useful hermeneutic device in approaching Lee's writings

Perhaps the more important difference between the Zen-based reading and past readings is that past critics have approached the novel with western literary theories,

standards and values. This approach has meant the imposition of narrative forms, narrative categories, and binaries, which are difficult to fit Lee's writings into. This difficulty of fit, together with his Zen vision, may be one of the reasons that Lee's works have received relatively little attention, especially from Malaysian scholars.

7.7 SUMMARY

This chapter demonstrated the practical application of the Zen-based Reading Procedure to a Zen-influenced text. The aim was to test its heuristic value, measured in terms of whether reading outcome is significantly different from the outcomes of readings based on mainstream approaches. Using the step-by-step guide of the 3-Reading Strategy, the First Reading focused on synthesising the textual data while paying attention to points where I come into conflict with the text. The First Reading ends with the identification of the first Key Conflict (KC1). In this reading the KC1 was the novel's epigraph, consisting of two sentences from an unidentified Buddhist text. Since the sentences showed women in a very poor and uncharacteristically cruel light for a Buddhist text, the task in the Second Reading was to check whether the epigraph had been fabricated by the author to lend religious support to the disparagement of women by the male characters in the novel. Using the Three Perceptions (3P) Forensic Tool, a one-pointed investigation of the epigraph, and the source-text, identified as the *Surangama* was done. The investigation showed that there is no evidence of misogyny in the source-text, and that the author had put together two unrelated sentences in order to achieve its misogynistic effect. Inferring that this has been done for a deconstructive purpose, I derived my KC1 Discourse Hypothesis, which is that the epigraph has been deliberately fabricated for the purpose of demolishing the idea that there is any basis for disparaging and marginalising women. This Discourse Hypothesis was used as the Diagnostic Tool in the Third Reading. The aims in the Third Reading were first to validate the Discourse Hypothesis and through the process of validation discover new discourses. For the validation process the three Forensic Tools, Three Perceptions (3P), Principals and Satellites (P&S), and the Ten Timeframe (10T) were used.

The Third Reading began with the one-pointed investigation of how women are portrayed in the narrative proper. The KC1 hypothesis was validated by the portrayal of most of the women in the narrative, but problematised by Ah Looi, the exception. A one-pointed investigation of the major male characters was then done to test the hypothesis. It was found that the male characters with a low opinion of women suffer from a lack of

spiritual and psychological integrity; the KC1 Discourse Hypothesis was thus redefined and validated through a one-pointed investigation of the characters, Hung, Gopal, and Mr. K.. In the one-pointed investigation of Mr. K., it was found that he was especially critical of socio-political issues then of topical interest in the national discourse. This led to the hypothesis, subsequently validated, that the KC2 discourse is to critique negative criticism of socio-political issues. It was found that through its narratives, the novel challenges negative criticism of national issues such as racial polarisation, the National Language Policy, inefficiencies in the government services, and the abuse of power and political connections. More importantly, it undermines the validity of negative criticisms by exposing the bigotry, confused thinking, hypocrisy and self-interest of the critics. In other words, the KC2 Discourse is a critique of the critics rather than a defence of government policies.

The problematics presented by one particular character, Ah Looi, were then addressed. Subsequent one-pointed investigations of enigmatic aspects of Ah Looi's story revealed that her story is the novel's critical crux. The solving of its "mystery" enabled me to discern how her story is connected to all the other discourses. At the same time, it led to the discovery of three discourses (KC3, KC4, and KC5), which are partially hidden because of the indirect way the stories are told, and also because they are profoundly Zen and steeped in Chinese religious beliefs. I characterise these discourses as soteriological because they point the way to the solution and resolution of the issues related to the inner and social conflicts identified in the first two discourses, which are critical and deconstructive in character. The basic message of the soteriological discourses is that we all need fictions to live with and by. What is important is to be able to make those fictions work for our individual wellbeing and social harmony, and not give them the power to control us by clinging to them as incontrovertible truths. A final discourse (KC6) was found hidden in the novel's use of time and place and in the narrative structure.

The review of past readings shows that the Zen-based Reading Procedure has produced a very different outcome. The main reasons for the difference are identified as (1) I approached the text with background knowledge of Zen philosophy; (2) the step-by-step 3-Reading Strategy forced me to read more closely and research texts alluded to in the novel; and (3) I did not approach the novel with western literary norms and values. In terms of literary theory, there are two significant outcomes of the Zen-based reading of *Flowers*. One is the discovery that in approaching the novel, a useful hermeneutic device is the concept of author as puppeteer, who uses his fictional creations (e.g. the epigraph, the narrator, and the

characters) as puppets that expose one another's illusions and thereby self-destruct. The second is the insight into the non-western ways Lee Kok Liang's Zen uses time and place in his fiction, of how his use of time and place impacts the way he structures his novel, with the effect that the structure of the novel becomes a metaphor for one the novel's hidden discourses.

[1] The novel, *London Does Not Belong To Me*, was posthumously edited and prepared for publication, by Syd Harris and Bernard Wilson, and published in 2003. The novel is based on Lee's experiences as a student in London in the 1950s.

[2]Lee was on his own account "a sceptical Zen Buddhist leaning towards Theravadaism and a sprinkling of Ganeshism" (Syd Harrex, 1993).

[3] There has been only one air crash in Malaysia in which there were no survivors. It occurred in 1977.

[4] Cf. Bakhtin's "hybrid constructions", utterances containing two "languages", the narrator's and the character's, "without any grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers" (Holquist 1988: 306).

[5] It is general knowledge among Buddhists that Gautama Buddha was reluctant to admit women into the circle of followers who had left their homes to join him on his mission, and agreed to do so only after repeated requests by Ananda and his foster mother, Gautami—and after imposing certain conditions. The issue of the negative attitude towards women in the Buddhist tradition has been the subject of many modern studies. For a sampling of views, see: Diana Y. Paul, "Buddhist Attitudes toward Women's Bodies" (1981); Heng-Ching Shih, *Women in Zen Buddhism:Chinese Bhiksunis in the Ch'an Tradition* http://www.geocities.com/zennun12_8/chanwomen.html; Dharmacari Jñānavira, *A Mirror forWomen? Reflections of the Feminine in Japanese Buddhism* http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/A%20Mirror%20for%20Women2.pdf.; and Mettanando Bhikkhu, "Was the Lord Buddha a sexist?", Bangkok Post, May 9, 2006; http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php.

[6] Cf Vasubandhu's discourse on the imaginary nature of the "hell-state", discussed in Ch. IV, 4.3.3.

[7] In the Chinese pantheon, the God of War, Kuan Kong is also known as the "demon-subduer" (Cheng Manchao 1999: 53) so the figure he is described as trampling on in the text may have been a depiction of a demon or evil spirit. Although he is called the God of War, he is "not a cruel tyrant delighting in battle and the slaying of enemies: he is the god who can *avert war and protect the people from its horrors*" (E.T.C. Werner 1988: 113). Worship of him among early Chinese immigrants to Malaya was popular because he represented their *kongsi*'s or cooperatives' ideals of "loyalty, courage, righteousness and brotherhood which bonded the groups together" (Kok Hu Jin 1997: 104).

[8] Hung is not the only worldly monk who takes advantage of his position in Lee's fiction. In *Death is a Ceremony* (1992) are two stories involving superstitious and gullible housewives who run off with men of religion—"Such a Good Man" and "Not So Long Ago but Still Around".

[9] See Tunku Abdul Rahman, *Viewpoints* (1978). The relevant articles are "Bringing Our People Together" (pp. 116-120), "The Case for English and Malay" (pp. 192-200), "Brain Drain at the University" (pp. 215-219), "Intra-Party Problems" (pp. 109-115), and "Power-Seekers in Government" (pp. 57-61). For more comprehensive overviews of the socio-economic and political situation during the immediate post-NEP period, see Tham Seong Chee (1978), S. Husin Ali (1981), and Rehman Rashid (1993).

[10]Lee explores this idea in his short story "Ronggeng-Ronggeng" in Lee Kok Liang, *Death is a Ceremony and Other Short Stories* (1992: 62-71).

11 The typology of victims of psychological, verbal, or physical abuse is fairly universal. The reference used here is the article "The Battered Wife Syndrome: The Lawyer's Role as Attorney and Counselor" by Katherine A. Kinser and Kim W. Mercier, (http://www.aaml.org/battered.htm). The article provides these characteristics of the victim: (1) any age, race or socioeconomic level; 2) low self-esteem; (3) passive and overly compliant; (4) internalizes blame; (5) very socially isolated, "cut off"; and (6) strong sense of family and loyalty. The following are some of the specifics that seem relevant for my investigation of Ah Looi. (a) The abused wife has internalized all the cultural myths and stereotypes and assumes the guilt of the abuser's behaviour. (b) She allows the husband to make all the important decisions. (c) She goes out of her way to ensure that the husband is made to feel important. (d) She internalizes her anger and has a high anxiety level, suffers from severe stress and fear, which can lead to, among others, stomach ailments. (e) She may go to extraordinary lengths to find some privacy from her husband. Particularly interesting is the case of a woman, whose physical ailments averted a battering incident. When she was hospitalized, her husband "became attentive and loving", but as soon as she returned home the terrorizing resumed.

[12] Compare Syed Hussein Alatas. 1977. *The myth of the lazy native*. London: Frank Cass.