

Three Poisons

greed – ill will – delusion

Kriben Pillay

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... when we penetrate to the roots of the problems they analyse, in each case we end up uncovering greed, ill will and delusion – ‘the three poisons’...

David R. Loy author of *The World Is Made of Stories*

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Acknowledgements

This collection of short stories was inspired by the writings of the Buddhist scholar, David Loy, which first brought to my attention the concept of the ‘three poisons’ – greed, ill will and delusion. After some time I realised that I had written stories that speak to each of these poisons: ‘Imagining John Lennon’¹ (delusion) was written in early 2006, and ‘The Twofold Tamil Rule’ (ill will) in the latter half of the same year. ‘An Unethical Clearance’ (greed) was written in 2010. While each story foregrounds a particular poison, the other poisons, as in life, are also present because they are all interconnected.

The story of the Twofold Tamil Rule could not have happened without my brother Indiren, who co-formulated the actual rule some thirty-three years ago. And I am thankful to my mother, Daya, my late father, Reg, and his late sister, Janey, whose family stories inspired the telling of this tale, where

1. It appears in *The Vintage Book of South African Indian Writing* (2010), edited by Rajendra Chetty.

some details, characters and situations are taken from the histories of both my maternal and paternal families and have been re-created to serve the truth of this narrative.

A special thank you to historian Dr Keith Tankard for patiently answering all my questions. I found his website (www.knowledge4africa.com) a wonderful source of previously unknown information about the place of my birth.

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I am also indebted to the Wikipedia internet website for valuable background information.

Thanks to my many friends who listened to me as the story took shape, especially my dear friend Shirley Bell. And later, Rajendra Chetty and Fiona Farquharson, who gave invaluable editorial input.

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And finally, my gratitude to the National Arts Council of South Africa for the grant to write the *Twofold Tamil Rule* novella.

Foreword

Kriben Pillay's writing endeavours are as remarkable as they are versatile, as evidenced by this collection of short stories: 'An Unethical Clearance', 'The Twofold Tamil Rule' and 'Imagining John Lennon'.

'An Unethical Clearance' is an accomplished piece where Pillay transcribes the adversary of clumsy bureaucracy to the new South Africa. His literary form here is taut and precisely controlled. The subtly-controlled and admirably-contrived episodes of comedy reach waves of climactic laughability. At first Shakespeare is black, as he may be derived from the legendary Zulu King Shaka's spear and then just as easily he may be Muslim, from Shaik's spear. Pillay thrusts quite sharply at the pomposity of academe as well as the government machinery that collaborates in the great mill of unlearning. At the heart of the tale, again, in the midst of the seemingly light and airy matter of his satire, there is the twist whereby 'unethical clearance' applies to the admission of harmful baby food as much as it does to the ethical suitability of

a candidate for research. All the bricks and plaster of the edifice of 'government' come tumbling down upon this explosion of the inequity and iniquity of conditions in the new South Africa which perpetrates the same blunders as the old; if not worse, given that the new promised so much better.

'The Twofold Tamil Rule' is the kernel of a much longer history of the lives of Indians who made South Africa their home. The novella, bordering on epic proportions, traces three generations of the Pillai family. The author does not dwell on the hardship and deprivation of those who ultimately succeeded so well in the country. There is a light, humorous touch to his narration that beguiles the darker strands of the political subtext. In many ways, this reflects the perceptive coping mechanisms of immigrants who were exploited considerably more than they were welcomed. Self-effacement, resourcefulness, hard work and an intuitive genius are both the material of the fiction as well as the stuff of the actual lives of the author's family. In this regard, Pillay's work accords with the axes of so much diaspora writing: his fictional constructs are also outlines of profoundly personal memories. The annals of his family and the boundaries of formal autobiography are blurred by pain and suffering into biography and larger community history. Reading these creative writing pieces is therefore at first engaging and instantly amusing, but this surface superficiality is the narrative lure to a potent exemplification of inequality and abuse. So

Pillay's playful play on words and consistent love of word-play is itself a metaphor for the surreal mystifications of 'ordinary life' as it exists for those privileged to enjoy it. For himself and his fictional representatives or representations, the ordinary kindnesses of 'ordinary life' dissolve beneath them. 'You stupid superstitious coolie' is the denigration that 'common' inhabitants of the colonial establishment were free to hurl at the 'other' without legal restraint or consequence.

Life in this shadow-land of semi-recognition is portrayed without malice. 'The Twofold Tamil Rule' incorporates this unhateful voice to speak of hatred and prejudice. In so doing, the narrator succeeds in architecting a convincing fictional structure that resonates with the depth and height of both plain living and high thinking. The boundaries of intellectual and moral substance are deftly galvanized to the solid experience of daily existence. The overtly comic detail of such incidents as the aubergine over the head is saved from slapstick by the inwardly reflected justice of Pillay's own integrity. He is ever vigilant and protective of his and his people's worth. Healthy iconoclasm runs through so many of the incidents of this quick-moving history of a family: they overcome impossible obstacles with easy commonsense and a complete disregard for the humbug of colonial administration. Despite all the legal outrages inflicted on the Pillai dynasty, there is so little indignation in return. The word 'coolie' may be thrown, but the reply in narrative politeness and real-life success is

not only the silence of happy living, but the mark of cultured beings. After all, Tamil remains one of the longest surviving classical languages and its literature is described as one of the great classical traditions of the world.

In 'Imagining John Lennon', Pillay astutely and creatively interprets the rapidly changing tenor of our times and turns this into the absorbing stuff of fiction. The story bears testament to the subtlety of Pillay's understanding of philosophy, the slippery cleft between normality/madness and the complexity of ordinary lives in an extraordinary society. This is the vision of an insightful and nuanced writer.

Professor Rajendra Chetty
Cape Town

greed

An Unethical Clearance

When the phone rang, Lucky moved in one fluid athletic arc from sleeping in bed to sitting in a chair facing his desk and reaching for his cell phone placed next to his laptop; a choreographer's delight in his display of grace and acute physical presence. More so, because Lucky was blind.

'Hello,' said Lucky, in a voice deeply mature beyond his years, fresh in its rich bass tones, showing no signs of recent sleep.

'Is that Mr Zulu?' enquired the female voice on the other side.

'Yes,' replied Lucky, 'this is Lucky Zulu speaking. How can I help you?'

'Mr Zulu,' came the reply, 'I am the postgraduate Faculty Administrator at the university, and I am afraid I have some bad news about your graduation.'

'What kind of bad news?' asked Lucky anxiously, as his mind quickly surveyed the processes that he had engaged in to comply with the examination of his doctoral thesis in English literature.

The thesis was formatted according to the faculty guidelines. One point five line spacing in Times New Roman at 11 points. Check.

The front pages had Roman numerals while the study itself had ordinary numbers. Check.

All citations had page numbers and references were formatted according to the Harvard referencing system. Check.

He had submitted his Intention to Submit form to the faculty office six months before submitting his thesis for examination. Check.

The four spiral-bound examination copies were accompanied by a plagiarism report. Check.

Permission to submit for examination was approved by his supervisor. Check.

All corrections contained in the three examiner's reports were attended to and signed off by his supervisor. Check.

The required number of final version hardbound copies were submitted timeously. Check.

'Then what is the problem?' thought Lucky as he waited to hear the bad news.

'We've only just discovered that you don't have ethical clearance,' said the voice firmly, 'and because of this we cannot include your name in the graduation programme for this year which, as you know, is next week.'

'There must be some kind of mistake,' replied Lucky, who knew of ethical clearances from his friends. The objective of ethical clearance was to

ensure ethical conduct on the part of the researcher towards the researched, be they animal or human subjects. The notion of ethical research gained momentum when it was discovered just how unethical some of the research conducted by universities and research institutions had been, especially in the field of drug research where research subjects – taken from marginalised, destitute communities, in exchange for very little money – were used as guinea pigs in the quest to find the latest cures for old and new diseases. Soon the notion extended to the social sciences where it was argued, and rightfully so, that participants in a research study were also potentially vulnerable and needed some kind of legal protection in the event of a researcher behaving unethically.

‘My thesis is on Shakespeare, and it involved no live humans, only some dead ones and lots of reading and writing,’ said Lucky.

‘I’m afraid that doesn’t matter,’ said the Faculty Administrator, a faint hint of righteousness edging her voice as she explained further. ‘As of this year, all research in the faculty requires ethical clearance, it’s a requirement of the Ministry of Health.’

‘The Ministry of Health?’ queried Lucky incredulously. ‘What do they have to do with literature, especially Shakespeare?’

‘The Ministry of Health,’ replied the Administrator, getting into her stride, ‘has passed legislation, which says that all studies that involve human subjects, dead or otherwise, must have ethical clearances. Our

university has to comply. You cannot graduate without an ethical clearance number.'

'But my supervisor... ' began Lucky, but before he could complete his sentence, the Administrator continued.

'Yes, your supervisor was wrong in not informing you of this necessary process, and he has been reprimanded for this, but the fact remains, you don't have ethical clearance, but there is a way out. We are willing to work with you on this.'

'And that is?' asked Lucky, who was beginning to feel like a man trapped in a maze in the dark.

'You can apply for retrospective clearance provided you fill in the detailed ten-page application form, which will then serve before the faculty ethical clearance committee, before going for final approval to the university-wide ethics board. The whole process takes about six weeks. But because graduation is next week, realistically we can only take the process forward for next year's graduation.'

'Six weeks!' exclaimed Lucky. 'This is ridiculous. I am coming over to see the Dean.'



'Yes, I understand your situation Mr Zulu, but as a university we have to comply with government regulations, or else as an institution we face severe consequences, like having our degrees withdrawn, or worse still, losing our subsidies,' said the Dean in

his slow, measured way, which made Lucky feel that he didn't understand.

'How could he?' thought Lucky, as the Dean rambled on inanely about the need for the country to benchmark itself against what was happening in first world countries. And how they were doing Lucky a favour by granting him a retrospective clearance, when, in fact, that was somewhat illogical (as the Dean pointed out logically), since the research had already been completed. And hence the need to follow procedure to the letter, in case there was a government audit.

'More of your conversation would infect my brain,' thought Lucky. 'How could I even consider him opposing an idiotic system when he is so much in its debt?' was Lucky's next thought. Lucky was mindful of the layered implications of this thought, especially its lack of political correctness.

'What the hell,' said Lucky to himself, 'my thesis is both politically correct and incorrect; it's simply a matter of how you're looking at it.'

Indeed, Lucky's intellectual labour of three years was highly novel. With breathtaking creative scholarship, Lucky set out to prove that Shakespeare was African. Not just African because of themes which resonate with the African mind, but literally African. Hence the title: Shaik Peer, Shakespeare and Shaka's Spear.

In a leap of linguistic licence, Lucky argued, with meticulous attention to scholarly detail, that the

honorific title *Shaik*, which was accorded to Arabic tribal elders and great Islamic scholars, was the root of the name *Shaka*, the leader who unified the Zulu people. And in a wheel of transforming connections, Shaik Peer was actually the real Shakespeare; the name of the former travelling with nomadic tribes from Northern Africa to the furthest south, to take root finally in the heroic leader Shaka, the founder of a nation. Lucky found a curious bit of historical synchronicity: Shaik Peer was a writer and linguist of unsurpassed genius, and he not only intimated his real identity in the name of a relatively unknown rural English actor, but was also part of an international Brotherhood of Intellectuals across religions, whose patron was the great Greek goddess Athena, the 'Shaker of Spears'. This synchronicity, more than two centuries after Shaik Peer's time, was to come full continental circle; his name arising in the great Zulu leader with a spear. Shaka's Spear. Such was Lucky's thesis: The Dark Lady of the sonnets was not a mystery; she was African. And so was the writer.

For Lucky, his theory was just as probable as all the other constructed ones.

'Everything is connected,' Lucky would always say. But how it was connected to not having ethical clearance, he could not answer. So he stood up, deftly placing his hand on the shoulder of the pretty volunteer who assisted him as a disabled student, and said:

'Professor, this is not right, and just how I found out that Shakespeare is not who we think he is, so

I am going to find out what is going on with these ethical clearances. In my case, this serves no one, but is simply frustrating. This is an administrative decision on the university's part, imposed perhaps by the Act passed by the Ministry of Health, so it can be challenged in court. Any such decision can. We can't be led by those who claim to see, but who are actually blind. I must do this, because nothing will come of nothing.'

In that moment, Lucky dimly began to see some kind of connection, but what it was precisely, he was not certain.



Lucky had always been a popular student among his peers. Graced with exceedingly good looks, he had no shortage of female volunteers to escort him around the university campus, and having endured his disability all his life, he became quite adept at all things technological, especially electronic communications.

With the aid of Facebook, Lucky mobilised hundreds of his fellow students within a few hours.

'Hi guys, I'm having a problem with my faculty; they say I cannot graduate next week. I need your help,' was the brief message that went out on the social network.

The next day the university community was greeted by placard-bearing students with signs which read:

*Don't interfere
With Shakespeare*

And:

*If Lucky doesn't graduate
Then see and hear
We're going to shake
Shaka's spear*

The Principal of the university was alarmed by the student action, particularly as she had no idea what it was all about. The Dean was called in, who simply said that his faculty was following university procedures.

'The university Research Office has to comply with government regulations concerning all research and ethical processes. Our hands are tied,' said the Dean deferentially.

'But surely, given the nature of this particular study, we can speed up the process,' stated the Principal, as she became aware of the growing sound of the students chanting 'Don't interfere with Shakespeare. Don't interfere with Shakespeare. Don't...'

'Unfortunately, to comply with the Ministry of Health process, we have implemented an electronic system that ensures that all ethical clearance applications go through the various approving structures in an orderly fashion, and this ensures that we have an audit trail to comply with the Act. We cannot

undo the system because it is being monitored by the central system housed in the Ministry of Health, and it automatically prevents any illegal entries. However, the real issue is that Mr Zulu does not want to apply for ethical clearance; he says it's unethical.'

As the Dean said this, he was wistfully reminded of his deep concern about this matter; one less graduating doctoral student for the current academic cycle, which in turn impacted on his performance management agreement. And a substantially decreased subsidy for the faculty. This was not his lucky day. Within himself he felt something stirring... Yes! He found that he wanted Lucky Zulu to graduate; he, too, wanted to join the students and chant, 'Don't interfere with Shakespeare.'

'I must do something, or this will turn ugly for us,' said the Principal, her words shaking the Dean out of his self-pitying reverie. 'I know the Minister of Health personally. We were in the struggle together. I will give her a call now.'



The Minister of Health was nonplussed about the whole affair.

'Ethical what?' she asked more than once. And when the details were eventually communicated, she replied, 'This falls under the Director of Health. As you were speaking I was looking at his performance agreement, and I see that "effecting a national regula-

tory mechanism for ethics and research at all tertiary institutions” is one of his key performance areas. But what has this got to do with Shakespeare?’



The Director of Health was not in the best of moods when the Minister phoned him and questioned him on the matter. A looming crisis in the Ministry was consuming his attention, and although irritated by the Minister’s call, he was not blind to the fact that he was politically obliged to entertain the Minister’s query.

‘I will have to look into it, Minister, because, as you know, we created a special committee to draft the policy that finally became an Act of Parliament. This committee was made up of highly esteemed specialists in ethics and research. And we used a qualified consulting firm to drive the process. The fact that it was accepted by parliament tells us that we did our work.’

What the Director omitted to tell the Minister was that the qualified consultancy firm was made up of some family members and friends who had hastily formed a company when the contract was put out to tender. The Director’s presence in the tendering process insured that they were awarded the tender. In turn the company hired a junior social science researcher – because she came cheap – to lead the team that would knock the policy into shape. And at

first they couldn't. The specialists all nit-picked on the details of the policy, what to leave in and what to exclude, and the junior researcher floundered in the depths of jargon. The budget was running out as more meetings were required to continue the work of the committee, and the consulting firm, fearing that their substantially large profits would be eaten into by bickering academics unable to arrive at a consensus, eventually approached the Director for a resolution to the matter. After all, his share of the profits would also be affected.

'It's simple,' he said, looking at what the committee had already arrived at. 'We'll just include the generic term "social processes" to cover any areas not covered by the other terms, and in this way no form of research that may raise ethical issues will escape the net.'

The Director was proud of his decisiveness, and when the weary committee approved the final wording, he indulged his self-congratulatory thoughts without any remorse about his involvement in the consultancy firm. After all, they had done a good job.

All of this was left unspoken in this current conversation with the Minister, except the urgent reiteration of the view that the Act prevented unethical research. That much of this was only possible on paper, and not in actuality, simply escaped his awareness, as indeed it had escaped the notice of everyone else.

'But what about Shakespeare?' asked the Minister. 'He's been dead all these years, surely we must have an easier way to make this kind of research possible

without all the red-tape?’

‘But that’s the point, Minister,’ said the Director, ‘now we can know in advance whether a dead person is being maligned or not. And from what I know about Mr Zulu’s research – and I am reading it right here on the internet – he is saying that Shakespeare was a Muslim. And so was Shaka.’

‘What, Shakespeare a Muslim, and Shaka too? No, no, there were no Muslims in Shakespeare’s time, that’s unethical,’ said the Minister, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘I must tell the Principal that I cannot support her on this issue. Friendship is constant in all things, except in the office.’

‘And that’s why our Act is right just as it is, and all the universities must comply. Just the other day one of my monitors read about research being done at one of our premier universities, which tries to show that a butterfly flapping its wings in China can cause a hurricane here. We cannot spend good money on such nonsense. We should go to the media with Mr Zulu’s Shakespeare garbage and let the public decide. We should not budge an inch.’



The anonymous email to Lucky simply said: Have you seen this? And a hypertext link directed Lucky to an article about babies dying in one of the government’s hospitals.

The contents of the internet web page were trans-

lated into an audio document, which played like a voice recording. Lucky heard that generous donations of baby milk formula, given by an overseas donor company, Butterfly Baby, for our country's poor, was not so generous after all. The milk was banned in many countries when it was discovered to cause serious illnesses – and death in some instances – in babies and toddlers. The company went into a large-scale image cleanup mode and publicly acknowledged the problem and recalled every single can of milk powder. As the synthesized voice continued, Lucky found to his horror that the company had then struck a deal with the Director of Health to take the contaminated product (claiming that new research had disapproved the allegation of contamination) at a fraction of the original cost for use in government hospitals. Once again the Director's family and friends, with an overwhelming civic conscience, eagerly helped to transport the hundreds of thousands of cans of milk powder to hospitals around the country. And curiously, they could also be found for sale in shops where the more economically destitute communities lived. Such was the compassion of the Director and his family and friends.

Butterfly Baby, the gifting company from the far-away country, had had a clearance sale, and as Lucky saw, it was an unethical clearance.

'Thy ambition, thou scarlet sin, robb'd this bewailing land.' Lucky mentally noted the quotation from *Henry VIII*, which popped into his mind.



Lucky forwarded the email to the Principal. The next day he received a call from the Faculty Administrator informing him that his name was on the graduation programme.

‘Congratulations, Lucky, well done,’ she said, sounding as if she was against the idiocy of the matter all along.



After the doctoral citation was read at the graduation ceremony by a more relaxed, smiling Dean, whose performance management agreement was now back on track, Lucky received a standing ovation from the packed auditorium. With a beautiful volunteer at his side (and she sensed that her elegant, low cut dress was not wasted on this handsome and insightful young man), he walked unerringly to be capped by the Principal.

‘You’re lucky,’ whispered the Principal, after capping the kneeling Lucky, resplendent in his red academic gown, with the sound of thunderous applause and ululating mothers drowning this slight exchange and keeping it just between the two.

‘Yes, I’m Lucky Zulu,’ was the comeback reply. ‘Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie.’

‘Yes, all’s well that ends well,’ smiled the Principal.