

Chapter V

The Relics of the Empire in V. S. Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh

As in Ghosh it appears all but natural that the Empire will crumble one day and the tyrants will have to face the oppressed to answer "for all that they have done". In his four novels there is almost no element of surprise, celebration, or lament when the moment of the fall of Empire arrives. Likewise, there is also no sense of wonder or grief over the decaying monuments of Empire that were once so imposing and grand.

In fact in Ghosh at times it appears that with the fall of imperialism the places and symbols, once associated with the rise/glorification of the imperialistic Europe, acquire a more human face that had become eclipsed by the imposing Empire. Thus Fokir's unique interaction with nature in *Tide* replaces Sir Daniels' grand imperial vision of bringing in settlers and to colonize the Sundarbans by subjugating its wild natural world. Likewise, in *Reason* it is Alu's failed attempt at fighting a war against the "germ" of money in the capitalist globe that coincides with the fall of the neo-imperial Star. In *Palace* it is the hitherto marginalized Ilongo, the illegitimate son of a colonizing colonial, or Suu Kyi, the imprisoned daughter of an assassinated national hero, who takes centre stage in the novel as the leader to usher in the possibility of a new era once the empire falls.

Besides, there are also instances in Ghosh's novels where the post-colonial nation appears to be unwilling to pay any more tribute to the emblems of European imperialism thereby leaving the residues of empire unacknowledged. As for example in *Reason*, when Jyoti expressed his curiosity about the "great blue mansion" where the Chief Administrator of Mahé lived, the Chief Administrator "answered Jyoti's questions with a casual wave – the French built it, their administrators lived here before – he was clearly bored with an explanation too frequently asked for" (166).

Antique, however, has a few references to the relics of empire in its decaying state, as for example the set of rooms Ghosh takes in rent in Nashawy that once belonged to a village lord, an 'omda who in collusion with the British ruled the village "like a personal fiefdom". Though the lord had built the house with care and extravagance – "palatial by local standards" – he died before he could settle into the house which soon became abandoned. But as far as the narrator is concerned, the decaying house neither arouses awe nor grief; rather he comes to feel that "the room was comfortable

and there was a cheerful feel to it, despite the gloomy shadows of the abandoned house and the eerie rattles it produced at night, when the wind whistled through its unboarded windows and flapping doors” (130).

Anyway, it is the overwhelming presence of the relics of empire that dominates the four novels of Naipaul to exhibit a wistful longing for the grandness of the dying empire. These novels by Naipaul frequently juxtapose the depraved and parasitic post-colonial societies with the grandness of a dying empire that still accommodates the former colonies with its treasure of civilization, culture, literature and an all-encompassing knowledge, thus ironically hastening its own death. *Bend*, for example, presents the decolonized Africa to be in such a turmoil that instead of striving for a model society, it rather threatens its very existence by trying to wipe out the exemplary civilization gifted by the Europe to help the primitive country come out of the darkness of savagery and ignorance. The European civilization’s crumbling into a primitive Africanness thus becomes equivalent to the absolute erasure of the residues of empire in the novel, exemplified in the cases like when the African students steal the gymnasium book from the lycée following their inability to realize its worth and its place in their town’s history.

As compared to these students, Salim finds that it is Father Huismans who pays the fitting tribute to the dying empire in his reverence for “everything connected with the European colonization” and therefore collecting “pieces of old steamers and bits of disused machinery” from the “ship-repair yard . . . long neglected and full of junk and rust” to proudly display them in the lycée “like relics of an early civilization” (72). While these were the imperial memorabilia, Father Huismans also surprises Salim by his collection of African masks and other wooden carvings as he thought that Africa was “dying or about to die. That was why it was so necessary, while that Africa still lived, to understand and collect and preserve its things”. Later, when Father Huismans shows his collection to Salim, he realizes that these African mementoes have actually been accepted into the magical realm of Empire and thereby have achieved a greater objective than even what their African makers had dreamed of about these. These masks and carvings, to Salim, thus transform into another instance of imperial relics: “in that dark, hot room, with the mask smells growing stronger, my own feeling of awe grew, my sense of what lay all around us outside . . . and in this room all the spirits of those dead masks, the powers they invoked, all the religious dread of simple men, seemed to have been concentrated. . . . So old, so new” (72-3).

But when the man who brought to life the decaying things of past and conferred meanings on those -- or could we say that he turned them into relics while they still lived? -- is lost into the same anarchy: Salim finds that the remains of empire that Father Huismans tried to deal with respect have been turned into junks and rust once again to the Africans, "Perhaps there was no one there with the knowledge and the eye that were required" (94-5). Thus while Father Huismans' death re-enacted the death of empire, it also demonstrated that decay was not essentially associated with the event of death itself, but with the problem of a credible inheritance. Because the Africans had lacked the knowledge and ability to inherit the European civilization/African masks, these had to decay. And quite ironically it is again the Europe that saves the "richest products of the forest" (95) from a degrading decay, as Salim notes how the American visitors steal the collection in the gun room -- may be to display them in some gallery in the United States. But at least the masks are saved and Salim knows these will be taken utmost care of, although he cannot say this about the decaying relics of European civilization and social order in the decolonized Africa that cause him much distress.

The town at the bend of the river appears as an embodiment of decaying relics of a bygone era not only to Salim but even to Indar, when he goes on a trip around the town with Salim. The repair yards and the docks are again full of rusting pieces of junk, while "the scuffed squares with their defaced and statue-less pedestals; the official buildings from the colonial time in avenue . . . the lycée, with the decaying masks", are "hardly things to show to a man who had been to Europe": even the "ruined cathedral, beautifully overgrown and looking antique, like something in Europe" could not be approached because of bush and snakes (133).

To Salim, such a lamentable state of decay of these last remaining traces of the empire is brought on the town not only by the retrograde uprisings by the Africans; but also by the mimic men's aping of the ways of the grand imperial masters that distorts and destroys the very objects of imitation and pushes them on a further path of decay. Thus during a visit to the capital, the President's city, Salim finds that the President's much publicized grand and progressive vision at work on the Africa of the bush was actually his way of imitating the European life in the colonial town of his childhood: "This was where, in colonial days, he had got his idea of Europe. The colonial city . . . was still to be seen. It was with this Europe that, in his own buildings, the President wished to compete" (293). But it had actually made the decay

worse, as while attempting a graft of Europe on primitive Africa sans the knowledge and eye of a Father Huismans, the President could make things only absurd:

The city, while decaying in the centre . . . was yet full of new public works . . . the statue of the European explorer who had charted the river and used the first steamer had been replaced by a gigantic statue of an African tribesman with spear and shield, done in the modern African style – Father Huismans would have had no time for it. Beside this statue was a smaller one of an African Madonna with a bowed, veiled head. Near by were the graves of the earliest Europeans: a little dead settlement, out of which it had all grown, out of which our own town had been seeded. Simple people, with simple trades and simple goods, but agents of Europe. (293)

The decay of the relics of the empire, hastened by the actions of a bunch of foolish mimic men, is once again apparent in the Domain: “Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass and sat in cushioned chairs covered in imitation velvet. It was like a curious fulfilment of Father Huismans’s prophecy about the retreat of African Africa and the success of the European graft” (116). The Domain, with “shoddy buildings” and “flashy furniture” thus becomes an object of ridicule to the “foreign builders and artisans”, while the Africans are let inside it in buses like tourists to admire the President’s grand, modern gift to Africa.

But this graft also proves short-lived, as if to prove that the hostile country is unworthy of both the empire and its residues. When Salim visits the Domain after returning from London, he finds the place not only devoid of its European scholars who gave such a charm and aura of intellectual progress to this otherwise insignificant building; but that the place has also lost the impression of being a European settlement in the bush. As the quarters are now occupied only by Africans – officers though, not the settlers from villages – the Domain now looks like an African settlement with the tenants growing cassava and maize on what were gardens earlier: “the Domain had lost its modern ‘show-place’ character. It was scruffier; every week it was becoming more of an African housing settlement. . . . how many changes had come to it! . . . an Arab settlement, a European outpost, a European suburb, a ruin like the ruin of a dead civilization, the glittering Domain of new Africa, and now this” (305-6). Even the old and half-blind Doberman, given away by a European to the African tenant before he left, appears as a poignant symbol of the decaying relics of the empire that was once so admired, cherished and valued. With the death of empire,

these relics too are left to decay, hoping with every moment that they will be saved, brought back to life: "The Doberman . . . was all over me, wagging his docked tail, beside himself with joy at my foreigner's smell, momentarily mistaking me for somebody else" (306).

However, the travelling protagonists in Naipaul transpose this nostalgia for the former empire and the distress over the decaying relics of it from the post-colonial countries, like Africa in *Bend*, to the grand imperial centre too. Thus when Salim goes to London he finds that "London is destroying itself for its tourist trade. . . . Hundreds of houses, thousands of flats, have been emptied to provide hotels, hostels and restaurants for the tourists" (277). But, most significantly, here too it is the Third World, represented by these tourists or immigrants, that Naipaul accuses of destroying the great imperial centre. Nazruddin thus tells Salim how the migrants flock to England following their dream of easy money and good life but are disappointed as the decaying centre can no longer carry their burden: "The place is so big and busy you take some time to see that very little is happening. It's just keeping itself going. A lot of people have been quietly wiped out. There's no new money, no real money, and this makes everybody more desperate. We've come here at the wrong time" (279-80).

The narrator of *Enigma* too feels quite the same about the present status of England that still serves as the centre of the narrator's universe; and thus like other representative protagonists in Naipaul carries the residues of the former empire in his mind and soul. The decay in the grand imperial setting is therefore found by him to be intimately associated with the ruin and decay he had witnessed in his colonial birthplace. The dying relics of the empire in Trinidad are thus transferred by him to the England of his dreams: "That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself, attached to myself: a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half-neglected estate, an estate full of reminders of its Edwardian past" (13).

But very soon the narrator finds that the comfort he took in the view that the decay in England and the ruin of his colonial past coincided in a way to let these take refuge into each other is ill-founded: that the decay of the estate was a reflection of his travel – a travel he made from a former colony to a former seat of Empire in London: "It was oddly unsettling . . . to deal with the idea that the dereliction of the place was new, the dereliction which to me had made it perfect as a place of refuge, and in which I had taken such comfort . . . that the process of contraction . . . had recently

accelerated: and that my own presence there was part of that accelerating process" (240). The narrator thus once again comes face to face with his colonial identity and the absurdity of his being in the country which once solely belonged to the imperial masters. The relics of the empire in his psyche thus make him admit that his living in the English estate was not only an expression of its decay but also the cause of it and also that when the manor was built "there would have been no room for me. The builder of the house and the designer of the garden could not have imagined, with their world view, that at a later time someone like me would have been in the grounds" (55).

But as the narrator runs the risk of his life-long striving for an arrival at the centre of the European civilization being negated by the grandeur of this past empire, he portrays the inheritors of this empire as compassionate and generous enough to let the likes of the narrator enter the magic world. The remnants of empire thus acquire another level of significance in this novel, such as in the portrayal of Jack and his garden: "He was not exactly a remnant: he had created his own life, his own world, almost his continent. But the world about him, which he so enjoyed and used, was too precious not to be used by others" (99-100).

Thereafter the narrator also finds a way to introduce his invisible landlord, another decaying relic of the empire, to the readers and to himself: "I felt an immense sympathy for my landlord, who starting at the other end of the world, now wished to hide, like me" (208); and also tries to penetrate the landlord's mind in order to get a clear view of the decay of the imperial relics that he finds around the master of the mansion. At one point of time, the narrator even goes as far as to claim that these remains of the empire were perfectly capable of sustaining him as a colonial writer while looking at these remains with the same awe that only the empire could inspire in him: "a life which had been the opposite of my landlord's had brought me to the solace of the debris of his garden, the debris of his own life. Debris which nonetheless never ceased to have an element of grandeur" (238).

Later the narrator also attempts to bring a change in his way of looking at things past so that instead of mourning for the decaying relics of the empire he could start to live "with the idea of change, of flux, and learned, profoundly, not to grieve for it." Besides, as he tries to reason, "Decay implied an ideal, a perfection in the past. But would I have cared to be in my cottage while the sixteen gardeners worked? When every growing plant aroused anxiety, every failure pain or criticism?" (228). But as

the narrator finds out, with the rapid changes in the manor and in his own health, he cannot sustain this outlook for long. As he grows weak in lungs because of his damp cottage, he also finds the manor ground to gradually enter a state of absolute ruin in the absence of Jack, Pitton and Mr Phillips. And eventually, when one morning during his daily walk around the manor ground he finds one part of the erstwhile open ground to be fenced by a new owner, the narrator has to admit a sense of loss, of decay: "I had trained myself to the idea of change, to avoid grief; not to see decay. . . . I had seen a world in flux. . . . But philosophy failed me now. . . . And this end of a cycle, in my life, and in the life of the manor, mixed up with the feeling of age which my illness was forcing on me, caused me grief" (366).

Besides the sadness for the decay of the remnants of a life so grand and precious to human civilization, what saddens the narrator further is the fact that he is one of those people who even after coming into contact with a decaying marvel cannot realize its true wonder:

And that was disappointing to me: that on the manor Pitton, like the Phillipses, and like me, was a camper in the ruins, living with what he found, delighted by the evidence of the life of the past – like a barbarian coming upon an ancient Roman villa in Gloucestershire, momentarily delighted by the wonder and ruin of a heating system he no longer understood or needed: like a barbarian in North Africa, brushing away new-desert sand from a mosaic floor with gods now as mysterious and unnecessary as the craft of the mosaic floor itself, once hawked about by merchants travelling with patterns, stones, and journeymen floor-layers – but not tormented in any romantic way by the idea of that life, not wishing to re-create or 'restore' (256)

As by these campers 'in the ruin', the narrator is also saddened by the plunderers in the ruin like the German and his brother, who take advantage of the decay of the manor to pilfer the garden statues, urns, stone pots or greenhouse doors when no one is there to guard these. Even the servants, who are of a new breed unlike in the past when the manor had sixteen gardeners, hasten this decay in a way that now directly concerns the ageing landlord. When after the death of Mr Phillips his wife tried to hire a help, the manor remained witness to a whole lot of motley applicants, while some of these were even appointed to serve the landlord with disastrous consequences. As Mrs Phillips recounts to the narrator, one of these uncouth servants enraged the landlord by going to his room when he asked for a glass of sherry "with a bottle in one hand

and a glass in the other, and looking as though she herself had had a drop too much.” The landlord later reproached Mrs Phillips that once again makes the narrator to appreciate the imperial master’s refusal to accept his status as a relic of a bygone era. “A little formality, Margaret. A little formality. It’s all I ask. A drink isn’t just a drink. It’s an occasion” (356).

The decay of the remnants of the empire around the narrator seems to be so overwhelming that at times he finds it to be reflected in the most unlikely of things such as the “very tall, elegant horse” that “had come to the valley to die” (39). The magnificent animal represents the relics of the empire to the narrator while the dairyman too “talked about the horse and the tragedy of its last days. So famous, so pampered, earner once of so much money, and now alone in a small, roughly fenced paddock, waiting for death, without crowds or acclaim. It wasn’t fair” (40).

But then, the narrator had finally learnt to accept even what “wasn’t fair” to be a part of life. And when the inevitable happened, the narrator also found out that the death of a way of life always deserved a proper mourning, as symbolized in his mourning for his recently dead sister, Sati: “I felt purged. I had had no rules to follow; but I felt I had done the right thing. I had concentrated on that person, that life, that unique character; I had honoured the person who had lived” (378). Decay and death thus retain their conventional expressions for the narrator, but he also gradually learns to accept decay and glory not as two opposite elements but as something that can be combined in a single life and in a single moment. And thereby, when he decides to write the novel *Enigma*, he does so to “re-create” the glorious past in his own way— with the help of the remains of the past he had been a sad witness to.

Half too presents a dying empire while the feeling here assumes a more concerned and urgent tone than it was in the earlier novels as Willie desperately travels across countries to find a place that can regenerate him and lead him to self-realization, away from the half life he has inherited in a birthplace entangled into its very web of decaying traditions, customs, and culture. However, once Willie as a student reaches England, a place that he thought to be secure with its imperial and thus glorious traditions, customs and culture, he is disheartened to find a decay to have set in at the former centre of the British Empire that threatens its past achievements and glory. As for example, Willie is surprised to learn that Percy is a landlord in old London where he had bought cheap property to rent these to the West Indian immigrants as he works with an old man who claims to be a developer—buying big houses at the centre of

London, and demolishing these after driving their old, 'protected' tenants with the help of a few musclemen. But that the imperial England is really on the verge of an unfortunate transmutation is evident from the effusive speech made by Roger's editor at a London dinner party as he presents himself as a relic of the grand empire:

I come from a smoky old town in the dark satanic north. Not many people want to know about us nowadays. But we have played our part in history. Our factories made goods that went all over the world, and wherever our goods went they helped to usher in the modern age. We quite rightly thought of ourselves as the centre of the world. But now the world has tilted, and it is only when I meet people like yourselves that I get some idea where the world is going. (98)

Quite ironically though, as if to show truthfully 'where the world is going', Roger invites the impostors, liars, intellectual snobs, and failed egoists like Peter, Richard, Marcus, Serafina –the Colombian woman, the poet and his wife, and Willie in the dinner party.

After his stay in England is over, Willie leaves the country to settle in Africa with Ana to find there yet another sight of decay and disintegration following the destructive spell of a violent decolonization. The magnificent edifices of civilization and enterprise that the Portuguese or other Europeans had built in that wilderness are found by Willie to be completely ruined at times like the abandoned German castle – "an enormous, extravagant estate house. . . . The man who had built on such a scale in the wilderness must have thought he would never die, or he had misread history and thought he was leaving untold wealth to his descendants" (203).

Likewise, at other times Willie also finds these remnants of the empire to be either decaying in body like the estate houses built by the likes of Ana's grandfather that are now crumbling into dust; or in mind like the governor's house: "the oldest building in the town and one of the oldest in the colony" that occasionally displayed the relics of the town's colonial history to the people to whom these remained "historical naval debris, like forgotten family junk, which no one wanted to throw away but which no one could identify and truly understand and honour" (200).

The repulsion that Willie feels after learning that the African wife of Gouveia, the Portuguese architect, is pregnant also reflects Willie's belief that the death of the empire and the decay of its relics were not solely caused by the gradual encroachment of African primitiveness upon the European civilization, but also by Europe's travels

into the barbarous places leading to a disgraceful intermingling that inevitably ended in the decay and the eventual death of the prestige and accomplishment of the European civilization.

While *Half* presented the dying empire in England and in Africa, in *Magic* the setting is primarily the post-colonial India and Europe, where the decay of a world civilization—synonymous with the death of empire to Willie—is all-pervasive. Thus Sarojini, living in Berlin with her husband, presents the decaying Western society to Willie as to be manifested in the petty thefts by common people. “This is what happens in West Berlin. They are at the end of an air corridor, and everything runs on a subsidy. So their energy goes on this kind of petty theft. It is the great failing of the West. They will find out” (9).

But once Willie comes to India to join what he believes to be a revolutionary social movement, he finds himself in a country that is still sustained by the social order and functionality inherited from the very dead empire whose relics the so-called social revolutions of the guerrillas wanted to erase. Consequently, the areas under guerrilla rule are nothing but the decay of the remaining orderliness of empire for Willie: “The fields of the liberated areas Willie knew had fallen into ruin: the old landlords and feudals had run away years before from the guerrilla chaos, and no secure new order had been established” (86).

The decay of the remaining traces of the empire is in fact not limited to any one sphere; while Willie does not fail to note the decay of imperial education among the half-men in India like Einstein or Ramachandra; he also observes the decay to have affected as unlikely activities as the imperial game of cricket. Thus Willie finds local boys playing the game: “Some scrawny boys were playing a rough kind of cricket with a very dirty tennis ball, a bat improvised from the central rib of a coconut branch, and a box for a wicket. Willie saw four or five balls bowled: there was no style or true knowledge of the game. . . . the parody of the cricket game” (91-2).

As like the German Castle in *Half*, *Magic* too presents the decaying relics of the empire in the form of the crumbling mansions, such as this old palatial house of a former feudal lord in one of the guerrilla-ruled villages: “The big house, too grand for the setting, was still there . . . there was the damp, dead, tainted smell of the rotting masonry of a long-abandoned mansion.” The uncared-for edifice was surrounded by lands once fertile but now grown wild: “overgrown fields, unirrigated and dried up,

untended orchards of lemons and sweet limes with long, straggly branches, acacia and neem growing everywhere” (116).

While India presents such a picture of decay to Willie, England too disappoints him once he comes back to the country after eighteen years and finds the decay that had set in there to have spread to such an extent as to threaten its very identity. However, as Willie finds it, it is not only the immigrants who are responsible for the decay of the remains of the empire: the ignorant inheritors of the empire like Peter the bankers are also as responsible for this decay. Thus a shocked Willie discovers that the banker, out of his desire to impress his guests, had pasted the pages from the rare illustrated copies of *The Graphic*, a famous Victorian magazine, on the walls of the bathroom. This magnificent relic of the empire thus is permanently lost to the future generation as with any future renovation of the house the pages will naturally be torn away and thrown into some builder’s rubbish dump.

Another unfortunate outcome of the death of empire is viewed by Willie as to be directly related to the arrival of immigrants from former colonies to London. Cricklewood, that shelters the immigrants from various Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, simply appears like a slum to a disgusted Willie with its “unending level red line of two-storey houses, brick and rendered concrete, with little shopping areas in between, shops as small and as low as the houses they served. . . . Nothing like a town, no park or gardens, no building apart from houses and shops” What repulse Willie further in this scene of degradation are “Indians; and Pakistanis; and Bangladeshis dressed as they might have been at home, the men with layers of gowns or shirts and with the white cap of submission to the Arab faith, their low-statured women even more bundled up and covered and with fearful black masks” (222-4).

It is not only these faceless immigrants from their wretched countries who Willie finds to disfigure the face of the once grand city; but there are other sorts of migrants too, like “the big, black or mixed man from the West Indies”, the coldly business minded and “very neat Malaysian Chinese”, or the man “from Pakistan and a religious fanatic, ready to spread the Arab faith” whom Willie meets in the training centre. Willie finds that these men “had been sent by their countries or companies to get at knowledge that was simply there, seemingly divinely provided, knowledge that had for a long time been unfairly denied them for racial or political reasons but was now, in a miraculously changed world, theirs to claim as their own” (235).

But as Willie notes, these men, undeserving of the treasures of imperial civilization, distorted this very knowledge offered to them and thus accelerated the decay of the remnants of a grand civilization and its vast treasure of knowledge: "this newly claimed knowledge confirmed each man in the rightness of his own racial or tribal or religious ways. Up the greasy pole and then letting go" (235).

Beside the account of a dying empire presented through a migrant's eyes; the novel also provides an insider's view on it in the figure of Roger. Although Willie had initially thought Roger to be oblivious to these unwelcome changes in his country, he later finds out with surprise that "Decline grieved him". To Willie Roger comes out as a patriot who had higher expectations from his countrymen, and who believed that socialism and high taxes and the following inflation actually destroyed families as much as the idea of family that were needed to pass on "values from one generation to the next. These shared values held a country together; the loss of those values broke a country up, hastened a general decline" (244). Thus Roger points out to Willie how the very people who live on the benefits doled out by the society are taking it down: how to claim benefits the women have been giving birth to children they can/do not take care of; how the people, though hopelessly into debts, try to imitate the lifestyle of the rich; and how the poor who once lived a life of mutual respect and benefit in society as servant-class have been transformed into criminals and thugs.

The awareness of the death of the empire reaches its climax into the episode of the wedding of Marcus's son with his white bride. Marcus, a West Indian African, who first appeared in *Half* as a young man with two ambitions in life — opening a bank account in the Queen's Bank and to have white grandchildren whom he can flaunt in the English society — finds his dreams come true in *Magic*. Willie thus finds Roger, a highly respected diplomat in *Magic*, to organize the wedding of his half-English son, Lyndhurst, with a pure-white aristocratic woman although they already had two children—one of them as white as Marcus had wanted—out of wedlock.

The wedding, as seen through the eyes of Willie and Roger is a pathetic show of vanity and decadence in every way starting with the history of the bride's aristocratic family as Willie learns that "'The founder of the girl's family was actually a great man . . . [But] They produced no other great figure.'" Moreover, "'In the great imperial period which followed, while so many other families came up, they went down, generation after generation. Some years ago they decided to let their big house rot. . . . In a short while the house was a ruin. They live in a cottage not far off'"

(286). Similarly, the wedding venue in the ruined house; the bride from a decaying aristocratic family; the mixed-race groom; the marriage with an inverted tradition where children are born before the marriage; the stiff priest in his extravagant and too ornate vestments that made him more concerned with his appearance than with the marriage; and the fierce band playing a Dutch music originally meant for slaves in colonial plantations of the past—all make the wedding a show in decay. As Willie observes ironically: “Lyndhurst, big-chested, thuggish looking, with Africa more than half scrubbed off him, and his pale plain bride, in her simple silk frock, seemed curiously ordinary. . . . Bride and groom had wished to have a simple occasion, and they had succeeded more than they knew” (291).

In another ironical twist of events, when Marcus runs to his white granddaughter to take the crying child to the toilet, an old white woman starts clapping for all the very wrong reason – remembering the old sentiments of a black servant rushing to the service of the white master – and others too follow her unwittingly; thus unknowingly mocking the moment of Marcus’s proud display of a white grandchild in his family. The incident thus demonstrates that the moment of assimilation into the imperial centre for Marcus and people like him would never arrive as the centre does not exist any longer. Rather, what Marcus actually achieves is an acceptance into a dead empire – a death that he carried in there himself.