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What do you think of Barack Obama?

By Anushka Anastasia Solomon

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"When any Rodrigo, Pedro or Valerio enters"

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, from his essay, "Heroism"

What do you think of Barack Obama? The silence grows long and weighted just as if someone had asked, "What do you think of John McCain?" It's the same question, but it does not make for the same desultory conversation.

The common grouse about John McCain is that he might be too old. Barack Obama has garnered, "too slick," "too charismatic" and, finally, the one that tickles my funny bone, "Obamamania" — which, in essence, reads as "too Obama." Unlike Beatlemania, Obamamania is a pejorative term.

This summer, I am rereading Emerson's essays, in particular his essay on heroism. It is going to take heroism for some of us to answer the above question, honestly.

Traditionally, one is taught not ideas but beliefs. Growing up here, as well as abroad, life quickly dissuades one of any misconceptions of "others." There is no supremacist race, and no inferior ones. The only cultures anymore are those of wealth,

poverty and education. In this context, the Obamas offer exemplary hope and inspiration. As an American family on the threshold of public, political and international life, they embody the American dream, having realized it successfully in their personal/professional lives, just like the Clintons, the McCains, the Bushes and countless other families in politics.

Michelle Obama's character is not inconsistent with the Judeo-Christian virtues that built America. Her remark — "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country" — has been woefully distorted. For those inclined to confuse their patriotism and faith with politics, there is this reminder by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5): "I am a man of unclean lips living amongst a people of unclean lips."

America is a great nation. The experience of growing up in America is as varied as that of the races and immigrants living here. If the prophet Isaiah can confess to unclean lips, then we can confess to those occasions when we have allowed ourselves to place our love of country/politics above God. Our lips are unclean. Even Job poured out the bitterness of his soul to God. Job's friends, in their piety, could not brook Job's complaints but God met Job and spoke to his soul, gaining in the end not only Job's soul but our declaration of faith: "In God We Trust."

When Somerset Maugham portrayed the Malays of Malaysia as a gentle, slow and stupid people, I read his descriptions just as I read descriptions of American slaves as a people to be feared, lazy or self-serving. To this day, these stereotypes endure, and hurt or hinder the noblest minds in my country of origin. Christianity is resisted and discarded unexamined because it is considered a "white man's religion." Islam is embraced unexamined because the penalty for leaving it is apostasy/death.

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According to reports in [MalaysiaKini.com](#), the African-American experience in Malaysia as recently as this past year is unpleasant. Malaysian Indians suffer the same complaint and experience not dissimilar oppression even though they are citizens of the country. Are we always to avoid the darker truth? (The pun was intended.)

Heroism is taking a risk, knowing that not all men are willing to leave the beaten path. A hero is one who stretches his hand, his faith and his imagination. Emerson is astute when he observes that the characteristic of true heroism is in its persistency. Having come this far, we cannot afford not to push ahead, and examine this "too old," "too slick," "too charismatic" and "too Obama."

I am inspired by the upcoming elections in my adopted country just as I am inspired by the outcome of the March 2008 elections in my country of origin. The people want something different now and are venturing to "go there" and examine the painful places where history and religion turned ugly. As always, brave hearts are willing to endure prison, exile, war or persecution for their views. Conventional media cannot record the ubiquitous silences, but history is writing itself and extending a new and provocative hope for the future. For the people of faith, God will provide as Emerson says, the sacrifice and the fire.

Perhaps, Old America is one thing and new America another, but at the heart of the questions "What do you think of John McCain, Barack Obama or the price of oil everywhere?" is the simple "What is." John McCain and Barack Obama are but men, like yet another biblical truth, Psalm 9, Verse 20: "Let the nations know they are but men."

The best candidate for president of the United States is the one who best answers the questions the future posits. In the final analysis, we, the people, belong

to neither nations nor men. The founders of America cut the foundational garments large and loose enough to fit everyman's conscience. When America votes, she will vote conscience. I am proud to become an American, in a nation where diverse men and women in times of terror have proven time and again to be heroic.

I look to the day when Malaysia emulates the example of America and ends her racial and religious politics. The day that a Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian Indian can run a fair campaign for prime minister of Malaysia is the day I will echo the proud American Michelle Obama's comment, saying: "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country of origin."

Anushka Solomon, 2002 Colorado Voices columnist, is one of 12 authors featured by Amnesty International in its "Heroes and Heroines" Exhibition at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Scotland, next month. She was born in Malaysia.
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