The black T-shirt

By Bernard Appassamy
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I admire Aznavour's refusal to be preemptively intimidated by judgement. I envy his apparent freedom from guilt.

In 1972, internationally renowned French singer Charles Aznavour released *Comme ils disent* about a gay man who lives with his mother, performs in drag at night, experiences homophobia, falls for heterosexual men, and goes to bed alone, dreaming of love on a loop.

At the end of the first verse, his drag character strips and stands naked in front of his male audience. In the English adaptation, he asks them:
'Tell me if you can
What makes a man a man?'

The French original is different:
'Je suis un homme, oh
Comme ils disent.'

A phonetic pun is at play in the latter. Aznavour can be heard saying in French:
‘I am a homo.
As they say.’

The affirmation in French becomes an ambiguous question in the English adaptation – both dare and plea, directly addressed to those listening. Aznavour subverts the finger-pointing use of *‘ils’* (‘they’), challenging those who judge his gay character. Aznavour was warned that this song, considered revolutionary at the time, could damage his worldwide reputation, but he declined to distance himself from its subject.

I discovered this song while thinking about guilt across cultures, languages and time. I’m interested in judgement, blame, shame and obligation – how they are assigned, experienced, witnessed and interpreted. Guilt as a form of power within love, self, family, faith and community. Guilt as the black t-shirt that runs through your entire load of washing. Good luck getting rid of it.

In *First Light* (2025), set in the Philippines, director James J. Robinson follows a conflicted conscience. After a chain of events triggered by a tragic accident, middle-aged Sister Yolanda finds herself questioning her lifelong faith and devotion to the Church. She cannot bear the corruption and injustice she encounters, refuses to be silenced and insists on seeking answers. An exasperated wealthy patron of the church confronts the nun, ‘What is one sin when so many will benefit?’

I heard in her question the creed of guilt: ‘How could you? After everything we have done for you?’

First Light, entirely in Tagalog, captured something of the distant, tropical and postcolonial world of my childhood in Mauritius, where the practice of my family’s Catholicism pervaded my life daily. The hierarchy of the Church and the supremacy of the Pope were revered. Choice did not come into my picture. So much love was given to me.

When I returned from university in Sydney, my father called me into his study, sat me down, and told me that now that I was an adult working out my place in the world, he had a word of warning for me.

This was a private conversation and will remain so. I have no desire to reduce the man who gave me so much, or our complex relationship, to a single conversation, for the sake of making a point or settling a score. I also do not wish for his words to become a catalyst for a chain of judgement. My judging my father. Readers judging my father or my choice to disclose his words. But it was formative enough to stall my coming out, and to hinder my writing about it until now, more than forty years later.

I of course feel guilty. The only reason I was able to study in Australia and eventually move back here permanently is because of my parents. When love, gratitude and loyalty become entangled with guilt, how can we make our own choices freely? Isn’t there always a cost to keeping silent

or speaking up? Don't we like to think that, unlike our parents, we understand nuance and won't repeat their mistakes?

'Remember the happy memories', my mother used to say, possibly deflecting any questioning of the past.

It took Clara Brack, the eldest daughter of artists John Brack and Helen Maudsley, twenty years to write *The Secret Landscapes, On not pleasing your mother*, published this year. At the age of 77, she challenged her mother's edict, 'Private is private'. She imagined conversations her father might have had with a psychotherapist and her mother with a psychiatrist, and revisited her memories of their claim to moral authority. Looking back, she measures the cost, 'The freedom of release was shadowed by mourning, mourning the years of having inhibited myself.' For me, Clara Brack's hybrid biography-memoir is quietly revolutionary.

Yet at the time, I didn't blink at my father's directive; it made perfect sense because love and virtue were indistinguishable. Notions of self were always suspicious, derogatory. Think selfish, self-centred, self-absorbed, except of course for selflessness. Never ever self-awareness.

12 years ago, a letter that my paternal grandfather had left behind as his emotional will in 1960 resurfaced and circulated among my extended family. My grandfather's values, as he articulated them, were interpreted differently according to memories a few family members had of him (I had none), where we lived, and what each one of us chose to see or ignore in his letter, including me.

Until then, I had understood such codes of behaviour only experientially. In my view, he legitimised, in writing and detail, a familiar formula: love = faith + sacrifice + virtue = moral authority = expectations of gratitude + obedience + loyalty = family unity. I thought his absolutes unassailable, and his use of guilt persuasive. I pondered his controlling nature, the influence he would have had over my grandmother, my father and his other children, and how that dynamic might have shaped who they became. Am I less ambivalent about interpreting my grandfather's letter because I never knew him personally? Or because, living in Australia with its own limitations, I am removed from that inherited legacy and find what he wanted to be remembered for profoundly upsetting?

Sacrifice is central to the argument between Sidney Poitier's character and his father in the 1967 film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The father fears for his son's interracial marriage and its consequences. Again guilt fuels the tension. He feels betrayed by his son after all he and his wife sacrificed for his education, and claims the moral credit he believes his son owes them.

Poitier's character turns the tables on his father. He refuses both to be held morally indebted and to accept that his parents' sacrifices should dictate his choices. He unpacks the logic behind love as a transaction, 'You did what you were supposed to do… Like I will owe my son… But you don't own me'. That said, he affirms their filiality, 'Dad. You're my father. I'm your son. I love you. I always have and I always will.'

Whereas Poitier's character's defiance is confrontational, Aznavour's is implicit in his lyrics and physical performance. The English adaptation of Aznavour's song gives us another clue:
'I ask myself what I have got
And what I am and what I'm not
What have I given?
The answers come from those who make
The rules that some of us must break
Just to keep living.'

My mother also said to wash colours separately.

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