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K S MANIAM: MALAYSIAN WRITER

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K S Maniam is a prolific writer, with three novels, plays, and numerous short stories to his credit. An intense, reserved, yet courteous person, he lives with his wife and children in a modest, two-storeyed house in Subang, one of the dormitory suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. It was my privilege to visit him there, and to engage in the discussions on which this profile draws. Despite his critically-acclaimed literary achievements, Maniam is denied official recognition and public acclaim in his country of birth because he chooses to write in English, rather than the national language known as Bahasa Malaysia. Yet there are valid reasons for his choice of literary medium, reasons that are inherent in Malaysia's modern history as former British colony and now independent state to which immigrant communities have made a vital contribution. Nor does his use of English render him less authentic a Malaysian than his literary counterparts in that country. Indeed, his works are imbued with the vibrancy of the Malaysian landscape, both human and physical.

Born Subramaniam Krishnan in 1942, K S Maniam is of Hindu, Tamil and working-class background. His birthplace was Bedong, a small town in Kedah situated in the rural north of Malaysia. He was the descendant of a grandmother who, like many thousands of others, had migrated from India to the Malay Peninsula around 1916. This same grandmother provides the model for the character of Periathai, the redoubtable, hump-backed pedlar who graces the pages of Maniam's first novel, *The Return*, published in 1981. Maniam himself was raised in a hospital compound, where his father was the hospital 'dhobi' or laundryman. He would accompany his parents to their second job of rubber-tapping on a nearby plantation, so that he became familiar with the lifestyle of the Tamil estate workers there. Maniam

attended the Tamil estate school for a year, and then insisted on transferring to the Ibrahim English school at Sungei Petani, a change that was substantially to alter the course of his life. Decades later, Maniam recalled that the Tamil school at Bedong had taken place in a fragile, isolated hall. His brief period of attendance at Tamil school was accompanied by an atmosphere of fear and trembling, where the principal teacher employed a heavy ruler to reinforce the curriculum of language and elementary mathematics. By contrast, Maniam felt a sensation of spiritual uplift in his subsequent English-medium schools.

After completing his schooling in 1960, Maniam stayed on for a few months as pupil-teacher, and then left for India, where he was briefly to study medicine. From India, he went to England to study teacher education. In England from 1962 to 1964, he attended the Malayan Teachers College in Wolverhampton, residing at Brinsford Lodge where his fellow-lodgers were ethnically-mixed, an experience he found positive. As Maniam remembers it, Brinsford Lodge was a potentially Malaysian society in the true sense of the word, a place where, for a magic moment, culture, ethnicity, birthplace, and language made little difference.

But Brinsford was a long way from Kedah. On successfully completing his Certificate of Education, Maniam returned to Malaysia and taught in various rural schools in Kedah until 1970, when he enrolled in an undergraduate Arts/English degree course at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. After completing a BA (Hons), he went on to obtain a Master's degree in English Literature, by completing a thesis on "A Critical History of Malaysian and Singaporean Poetry in English." His academic career commenced in 1979, when he was appointed to a lectureship in English at the University of Malaya. He retired from an Associate Professorship in the Department of English at that University in 1997. Through English-medium education, Maniam escaped the desperate confines of his small town/plantation childhood, and even now he publicly affirms that the English language has given him a centre to life.

The human milieu from which Maniam came was the vast labour force spread through the rubber, tea, and oil palm estates of the Malay Peninsula. These people were predominantly the descendants of Hindu Tamils

originally recruited from Southern India by kangany contractors on behalf of British estate proprietors, and brought across the Bay of Bengal to the Malay Peninsula during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his pioneering sociological study, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (1970), Ravindra Jain was the first systematically to delineate the typical living and working conditions of Malaysian Indians. Importantly, Jain portrayed the Malaysian rubber plantation in holistic terms, as a total environmental framework for the lives of most of its inhabitants, whom he correctly identified as proletarians (*tolil-ali* in Tamil) rather than peasants. From the pre-dawn muster of tappers at 5.30 am, to the end of latex collection at 2pm, six days per week, the estate defined the material circumstances of its inhabitants. In 1970, the workers of Jain's study were lowly paid, basically housed, caste ridden (either *sudra*- labourer or *harijan*-untouchable), male dominated, poorly educated, socially immobile, and stuck in the *ulu* (up-country).

The essential, vulnerable marginality of Malaysia's 2 million ethnic Indians has been reinforced in subsequent studies. Despite some migration to cities and towns, the many who remain on estates experience high levels of apathy, indebtedness, drunkenness, *samsu* and drug addiction, and domestic violence. In one especially moving account which appeared in the *New Straits Times* during June, 1995, five Indian Malaysian women, all in their early 20s and from oil-palm estates near Batang Berjuntai in Selangor, had recently died of AIDS. These women had been living in the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, allegedly forced off the estates into drug-taking and prostitution by their husbands. Before their desperately untimely deaths, they had all been mothers with young children. The plantation estate remains, indeed, a world to transcend. Maniam, veteran of this plantation world, regards it as nothing less than stifling and sick.

"Ratnamuni" was Maniam's first published short story. Dynamic in its language, form, and content, "Ratnamuni" takes the form of a dramatic monologue, based on the inner consciousness of a semi-literate estate worker, Muniandy, and his attempts to make some sense both of his complex familial relationships and his life in a new land. For Muniandy, there is just one burning question: who is the father of his much-loved son? Is it his quiet neighbour, Muthiah, who always seemed to have his nose in a book,

studying to be a clerk, or is it Muniandy himself? On the answer to this crucial question hangs either triumph or tragedy for the narrator and title character. The linguistic vehicle of the story is starkly conveyed in its very first sentence: "*Repot-kepot, ayah*. I cannot tell straight." Here is Malaysian English in full flower. Muniandy is a more complex character than he first appears, and becomes, in fact, a vehicle for many of the familiar, characteristic themes of Maniam's prose writing, such as light and darkness, the immanence of Hinduism, the density and naturalness of Hindu ritual, the process of migration across the Bay of Bengal to a new and unfamiliar land, this 'Ma-la-ya', the male who struggles in personal relationships with women, and the daily grind of hard labour, poverty, drudgery, boredom, promiscuity, and domestic violence only temporarily removed by drunkenness. Through his magical drum, the *uduku*, Muniandy instinctively reaches back to the illusions of his past in the 'Big Country' (i.e. India), and tends to answer practical questions in terms of Hindu metaphysics like: "The Lord Siva danced and made the world." Muniandy, the narrator of "Ratnamuni" declared that he stayed all his life in Bedong. Like Muniandy, Maniam's cultural roots remain in a small town and adjacent rubber estate in the north of the peninsula. Even one year of Tamil-medium estate schooling at a very early age, reflects Maniam, meant he had been "exposed to an environment and a language that would trail me for the rest of my life. The environment was the estate houses, the rubber trees and the red, laterite road that led away from the main, tar road, into remoteness." Indeed, the Malaysian plantation and its surrounding community constitute for Maniam what the major writer of the American South, William Faulkner, liked to call the "old ineradicable rhythm." Some of the best episodes in Maniam's fiction contain dense description of the estate lifestyle. Like R K Narayan and his Malgudi, William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, Thomas Hardy and Wessex, even V S Naipaul and Trinidad, Maniam writes most compellingly about the Kedah he knows so well as complete insider.

In Maniam's second novel, *In A Far Country* (1993), the main character is Rajan, a successful business executive in the real estate and construction industry. For much of the novel, Rajan is undergoing a form of mid-life crisis. However, he is really most convincing when he reminisces over the plantation community of his boyhood, and his memories are overwhelmingly negative. Thus he recalls a permanently aggrieved mother

and a father sodden with toddy for most of the days and nights, a grim picture of "limp helplessness." The rubber estates themselves were manifestly nothing like the fabulous mythological kingdoms uncovered by earlier Indian explorers in prehistoric times across the Bay of Bengal. After arrival in Kedah, the immigrant father feels trapped, helpless, impotent, condemned, unable to move. Like other familiar Maniam characters, he cannot fulfil his dreams of heaven on earth, let alone domicile in this new land. As far as his son is concerned, even by the age of 13, Rajan, who is one of eight children, yearns to escape his surroundings. Not even wonderfully mysterious rituals like *Deepavali*, or stubborn, captivating characters like Mani the goat and Muniandy the smoke-house attendant, can dampen Rajan's resolve to leave, firstly by voracious reading, and then through formal schooling.

Human misery can also be the parent of invention. Not all of Maniam's childhood memories are bleak and desolate. One instance of the human potential of small town/estate life is to be found in the early (1976) story entitled "The Eagles", which records the daily escapades of amiable young Ganesan and his gang from the estates around Sungei Petani during the 1950s. Ganesan goes about the green walls and multitude of wooden bungalows of the New Indian Resettlement Village, delivering bundles of laundry on his bicycle, buying little things on credit at Ah Chong's shop, never missing the Tamil film screening each month on the Thye Eng Estate, and generally negotiating a living between the laundry and "the big house."

There is also oblique comment on deep-seated ethnic differences between two of Malaysia's immigrant communities in stories like "The Aborting." It is worth noting that Maniam's stories and novels rarely contain substantial characters from Malaysia's indigenous, Muslim, and politically dominant Malay community

School has been a key institution in Maniam's creative life, befitting a former teacher and representing the possibilities of systematic, structured learning, of upward social mobility, of self-actualisation, and most importantly, of escape even during the late British colonial period. Of particular moment were the schools of boyhood memory. In Maniam's first novel, *The Return*, Ravi, the principal character, first attended the Tamil-

medium primary school on Riverside Estate near Bedong. There he found Murugesu, who turned out to be more a seductive magician than teacher. He found the Tamil Primer with its wondrous stories of elephants, deer, snakes, mongooses, dogs, and cats; and he found the Tamil writing that opened up a fascinating South Indian cultural world. After a year, however, Ravi was sent to the English-medium school in Sungei Petani, with its colonial stone architecture, efficient Chinese clerks, silent rooms, rows of desks, square-lined exercise books, and ubiquitous pictures of daffodils. Above all else, the English school of the late colonial era was the domain of Miss Nancy, the teacher who was to guide Ravi through the remainder of his primary education, she of the intoxicatingly fair complexion, raven hair, frilled skirt, starched blouse, and a voice with a "raucous, imperious edge." Miss Nancy was obsessed with fantasies like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and also with discipline and bodily hygiene. Her school-room centred Ravi's life. Order, cleanliness, and individuality became his defining characteristics. For Ravi, the worlds of school and home began to lurch dramatically and disturbingly apart, and he came to view his Indian domesticity with disdain, employing negative terms like "darkness," "futility," and "primitive," (the last is an adjective that appears twice in the relevant portion of the text). When his father, Naina, eventually agreed to Ravi's request for a tooth-brush, the Chinese shop-keeper cannily observed that Ravi would be "a real Englishman now." When thrashed by a Tamil laundry-supervisor for talking with some visiting English children, (and thereby challenging one of the unwritten rules of the colonial caste system), Ravi resolved in one dramatic moment of definition to get away from Bedong. "I turned away from the God who ruled my people."

These brief references to some of Maniam's texts tell us of an author living in a particular environment during a particular period of time, that is, from British Malaya to Malaysia. They provide insights that are both personal and cultural, furnishing a Tamil Indian perspective of Malaysia from a small town and rubber estate on the north of the peninsula. This perspective from the frontier, together with an intense Hindu spirituality and a passion for the English language, constitute the centre of Maniam's life and work. Such influences furnish a vivid, ingrained integrity to his creative achievement. K S Maniam's lonely pursuit of literary excellence and transcendence faces many obstacles. Still, in highlighting the fragility of belonging for recent

immigrant groups, as well as the marginality of Indian Malaysians, Maniam has furnished a vital and authentic Malaysian mosaic, one that somehow eludes the official tourist guides and demographic profiles. In *Between Lives*, his latest novel (2003), Maniam again emphasises the importance of attachment to the land, this time from a consciously feminine vantage point. However, Maniam's appreciation of the undeniable beauty and wealth of the physical landscape has not been able to transcend a profound, haunted sense of cultural loss, and, for at least one Indian Malaysian, of never having achieved a secular homeland.

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