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## **DIASPORA AND IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF K S MANIAM**

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### **Introduction**

Emmanuel Nelson has truly observed that the “haunting presence of India” lies at the core of diasporic fiction by writers of Indian descent, together with the “anguish of personal loss” that an awareness of India engenders. (1) In any consideration of diasporic fiction, terms like exile, alienation, nostalgia, despair, dislocation, abandonment, and disintegration come readily to mind. In the case of distinguished Malaysian Indian writer, K S Maniam, the list can be augmented by reference to a profound sense of futility, and the absence of any personal sense of contemporary national identity. In 1984, Maniam poignantly reflected that the life of his particular community in Malaysia was “a straining towards achievement that does not end in fulfillment.” (2) This human gap between *what could be* and *what is* constitutes the actual fate of diaspora in Maniam’s fiction. The prospects for diaspora are, in short, very limited.

This paper treats Maniam’s novels and short stories as documents of cultural knowledge, both of the South Indian community in Malaysia and of nation-building in Malaysia itself. Maniam’s fiction is also assessed in light of V S Naipaul’s concern that diasporic writers should strive to create a self in their own words, to assert their own voice in the country

where they live, and so refuse to accept cultural or personal extinction. (3) The paper outlines the consequences of that refusal, especially Maniam's inability to relate to a particular Malayo-Muslim definition of the nation. The paper also draws out the writer's preference for a dynamic and multi-faceted Malaysian culture grounded on metaphysical and humanistic assumptions, as well as a post-colonial state graciously informed by its diverse cultural heritage.

### **About the Author**

"A writer," reflects V S Naipaul, "after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other) ... (4), and so it proves with Maniam. 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 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 estate, so that he became familiar at first-hand with the lifestyle of the Tamil 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 primitive, isolated hall. During his brief period of attendance at Tamil school, there was an atmosphere of fear, where the principal teacher employed a heavy ruler to

reinforce the curriculum of language and elementary mathematics. By contrast, Maniam found 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 on the whole. 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 his home state of 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, involving 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. Maniam escaped the desperate confines of his small town/plantation childhood through English-medium education, and even now he publicly affirms that the English language has given him a centre to life.

## About the Works and the Themes

Both of Maniam's published novels, *The Return* (1981) and *In a Far Country* (1993), can fairly be viewed as reflections on the attempts by migrants from India, the 'Big Country' across the Bay of Bengal, to put down roots in Malaysian soil, and to make some sense of their new place. In *The Return*, a young, English-educated Malaysian Indian comes back from further education in Britain to confront the dual realities of the Malaysian landscape and his communal extended family. These two realities are barely compatible. As told through the eyes of a young Ravi, the prism and vantagepoint of the text remains culturally Indian. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that much of the plot constitutes a hymn to Indian ethnicity. (5) "How," Ravi asks, "does one describe the land one lived in but never saw?", and yet at the same time this mystical, mythical land called India was "more tangible than the concrete one we flitted through every day." (6) India was a place of memory and nostalgia where Ravi had never physically been, but only heard about from older relatives or observed with awe in wondrous, transplanted religious festivals and rituals. Maniam's evocation of a family's distant but glamorous past on the sub-continent provides dramatic, ironic contrast to the grim conditions where Malaysia's Tamils actually lived on the rubber estates near Bedong. As more than one critic has pointed out, the text is so replete with Indian symbols and characters that readers could be forgiven for inferring that British Malaya was a mostly Indian preserve. There are some scattered references to Chinese shopkeepers, but really none of consequence to the Malays who even then made up half the population of the peninsula. Instead, as Margaret Yong observes, the work "vibrates with the emotional associations of a subject intimately understood." (7)

Maniam writes evocatively of *Nataraja*, the cosmic dancer of Hindu mythology or *Siva* as ‘Lord of the Dance’, whom true believers regard as responsible for the creation of the universe, and whose ubiquitous presence in *The Return* can be seen to guide the destiny of the South Indian estate community in Bedong, Malaysia. Also present is Saraswathi, the Hindu goddess of fertility, procreation and purification, as well as more specifically here, of writing and learning. Then there are events like *Ponggal*, the first day of the first month in the Hindu calendar, and of *Thaipusam*, the Hindu tribute to Lord Subramaniam, whose Tamil name is Murugan, the ‘divine child’ believed to have the power to drive away illnesses. *Thaipusam* is a magical festival of repentance and ritual purification, the key feature of which is the carrying of *kavadi* (or burdens). Deepavali, the Hindu festival of lights, is held on the day of the New Moon between mid-October and mid-November. Then all the lamps of a household are lit to celebrate the reappearance of the sun, which has been ‘hidden’ during the rainy season in India by malevolent water-spirits. In mythological terms, Lord Krishna rescued people from sufferings inflicted by the demon Narakasura, and they lit lamps to symbolize the victory of light over dark, and good over evil.

Events such as these helped transform and transcend remote plantation existence for an occasional day at a time. Festivals such as Deepavali and *Thaipusam* also served to bring together the South Indian population, to reinforce its communal memory, and to help assert its identity as an ethnic minority in a new country. Of course, the same festivals hindered the prospects for integration into a broader Malaysian society.

Other particular rituals detailed in the text that contribute to the “Hinduization” of young Ravi include his initiation ceremony, where his teacher, Murugan’s, Sanskrit “covered me with a vibrant sensitivity,”(8). There was the funeral and cremation of his beloved

grandmother, which Ravi recalled as a "dramatic, glamorous event"(9). There was the funeral rite for a younger brother, Kumar, after a fatal traffic accident, with "incense smoking and camphor burning in a mound,"(10), and there was his father's dramatic renunciation of this earthly life and self-immolation by fire at the end of the story.

No more substantive symbolization of an Indian past exists in all of Maniam's prose than the character of Maniam's grandmother in *The Return*. This woman, who became known as Periathai, or Big Mother, had 'a firm gait in her walk'(11) and a hump in her back, so symbolic of resilience and endurance, that eventually osmosed into a terminal tumor. Periathai was a woman of vital, magnetic qualities who worked in turn as peddler, tinker, faith healer, cook, and farmer, and mothered three sons and numerous grand-children. Indeed, for the youthful Ravi (the narrator based roughly on Maniam himself), the determined, self-reliant Periathai took on mythical proportions. She builds a squatter's house in Bedong that is replete with images from the Ramayana, the River Ganges, a rural Indian village, and of course, the ubiquitous statue of Natarja. Most importantly for the book-obsessed young Ravi, she helps fund his secondary schooling at a time when all seemed lost.

Yet Periathai's efforts at cultural reconstruction in a new land are illusory and sadly doomed. Bravely, she tells Ravi never to let anything break his spirit, but she also fails to establish legal ownership of the piece of earth she occupies in Malaysia, for, in her grandson's words, she had "no papers, only a vague belief, and a dubious loyalty." (12) The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of post-colonial narrative as "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history." (13) and exemplifies in Joyce Carol Oates' strong words:

..... how powerful the instinct is to tell a story, to have one's story told, to be somehow transformed by the story of one's life told by another, and published, and read; how deep the yearning is to interpret one's life as, not mainly accident, as most lives are, but as a coherent narrative, with a supporting cast, set in a real, vividly recalled time and place. This instinct to memorialize is at the heart of writing, and the complex of bittersweet sensations we call homesickness is the predominant emotion." (14)

Other wonderful characters that evoked India for young Ravi included Murugesu, the primary teacher specially recruited for the Tamil-medium school on Riverside Estate in Bedong. Murugesu, according to the impressionable Ravi, "looked like a god himself, pot-bellied, remote and radiating with warmth." (15) On the blackboard, Murugesu would compose "lines of curving, intricate Tamil writing" (16), and teach from a Tamil Primer with its wondrous stories of elephants, deer, snakes, mongooses, dogs, and cats. To Ravi, Murugesu turned out to be more seductive magician than teacher, thereby unfolding "an excitingly unexpected and knowable world." (17) Finally, there was Pather, the legendary goldsmith so popular with the women of the estate, a spinner of tales who "added gloss to otherwise lacklustre lives." (18)

Not all the characters that evoked India proved to be seductive. Menon, the overseer of the estate, is a cruel, devious, bullying figure who zealously upholds order in the estate work force by reinforcing the rules of caste and class, dismissing Ravi's educational plans as "useless dreams". (19) Indeed, the character of Menon, the *ayah*, demonstrates that caste is more burden than blessing for South Indians abroad. However, the most ambivalent influence on Ravi's life comes from his father, Kannan, initially portrayed as a frustrated, violent, restricted man, prone to bursts of sullen, drunken rage, but who also is ambitious, determined

and industrious, with a secret admiration for his son's achievements at school and work. Like Ravi, Kannan is an achiever who challenges and renders impotent the caste imperatives in Bedong. Successful in the laundry business, he attains the name of 'Naina,' an honorific term of respect as the 'Father' amongst the Tamils of Bedong. Eventually, Naina renounces worldly success in the manner of a Hindu *sanyasi*, only to burn himself and his house on borrowed land in a ritual of self-immolation by fire. The price for his family, though, was what V S Naipaul has elsewhere aptly called "the disintegration of our private Hindu world." (20)

For while distant, unseen India evoked a mystical admiration, the actual process of migration from India carried a far less salubrious hue. In Maniam's first published short story, 'Ratnamuni,' Muniandy recalls that he 'did not come to this Ma-la-ya straight' and hints at displacement from his familial landholding back in South India (21). By comparison, Rajan's father from the second novel, *In a Far Country*, recalls that the only significant event in his entire life was his original "escape from India to Malaysia." (22) However, there was nothing heroic about the sea journey itself, which was rather something akin to a passage through hell. As the father related:

"The ship we came in was crowded and foul. The hulls were rusted.  
When I drank water from the taps there was only the taste of rust.  
And the human dung - all over the place. The men not even closing  
the door. The door too rusted to be closed. The women with just  
the saris over their thighs, to hide their shame. Sometimes no water  
even to wash, to flush away the human filth."(23)

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. As portrayed in *The Return*, the estates of northern Malaysia are desperate, violent, cruel places where men get drunk, shout insults, and brawl incessantly, while women gossip and children call each other bad names. According to Ravi, the Riverside estate at Bedong was a “slave patch on which one was drive relentlessly, cornered and whipped. Over it rose a sky dark with cruelty, injustice, and irrationality.” (24)

“Ratnamuni”(1981) was Maniam’s first published short story. Dynamic in its form, language, 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 desperate, 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.” (25) Here is Malaysian English in full flower. Muniandy is a more complex character than he first appears. He 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 temporarily made once-removed by drunkenness. Via 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.”

In Maniam’s second novel, *In A Far Country* (1993), the main character, Rajan, is 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. 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.”(26) After arrival in Kedah, the immigrant father feels trapped, impotent, condemned. Like other familiar Maniam characters, he cannot find a home in this new land.

“... I thought I would find heaven. But people can be wrong. A man can be wrong. The price has to be paid. I am paying it with blood. With all this suffering ...Why must there be suffering? We suffered there in India. Now there is only suffering. No escape like the last time.” (27)

In *In a Far Country*, even by the age of 13, Rajan, who is one of eight children, yearns to escape the “the bareness and harshness of my surroundings.”(28) 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.

It was also English-medium schooling that offered Ravi the best prospect of escape in *The Return*. After a year of Tamil schooling with the marvelous Murugesu, Ravi was sent to the English-medium school in Sungei Patani, 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.”(29) Miss Nancy was obsessed with fantasies like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and also with discipline and bodily hygiene. Her schoolroom 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). (30) When his father, Naina, eventually agreed to Ravi’s request for a toothbrush, the Chinese shopkeeper cannily observed that Ravi would be “a real Englishman now.”(31) 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 escape from Bedong. “ I turned away from the God who ruled my people.” (32)

But what of those who cannot turn away? For those who cannot escape the consequences of diaspora, Maniam offers a discernibly metaphysical strain in his work. As Maniam himself relates it, his literary works try to link the “precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality.” (33) Indeed, in successive interviews about his work, he has expressed a quest for the absorption of an individual self, or selves, into a

larger, transcendent whole. (34) A profound sense of the vanity of earthly things permeates the recent story, "A Hundred Years After", and in this case, academic things. As outlined above, a university teacher coming to terms with retirement contemplates the parlous state of his career, his marriage, his home, and life in general. Eventually, he ritualistically and symbolically burns his dissertations, articles, and conference papers, convinced by the ephemerality of it all.

Rajan of *In a Far Country* is a Malaysian Indian who has come out of a remote estate world and achieved success in business. Rajan is defined as a "house and property owner, with a solid bank account"(35), but he also has a decidedly reflective bent. At the outset of the novel, he is undergoing a kind of mid-life, mid-career crisis, shut up in a favourite room in his house, obsessed with his inner self, shunning both food and the company of his family, searching for a sense of personal identity in contemporary Malaysia, and yearning for some transcendental light above and beyond mundane communal and material preoccupations.

In his adult years, Rajan meets up with Lee Shin, a Chinese business colleague, and decides to make a detailed, sociological-type, comparative "study" of his experience. Lee Shin turns out to be a private, cultivated person of calligraphy, banners, flute, and decorated dragons, who also is doomed to die after a failed quest to transplant his beloved Chinese culture into Malaysian soil. "He just wanted to be left alone," Rajan reflects wistfully on the futility of Lee Shin's ultimate goal (35), though Rajan also accurately perceives Lee Shin as a victim of illusion (36X, p. 136). Still trying to comprehend the meaning of Malaysia, Rajan turns to the rural Malay, Zulkifli, who uses the image of the tiger to convince him of the indigenous Malay community's traditional, mystical attitude to the landscape. However, despite several forays into the deepest *ulu*, Rajan does not actually come face-to-face with this tiger, and in

fact runs away from the prospect. Zulkifli gently but pointedly reminds him, "You don't have ancestors here."(36) Maniam employs the natural symbolism of the tiger to signify the essence of the Malay community, rather than the seemingly more obvious symbolism of Islam, which is not mentioned in the text at all. Yet Islam is a fundamental point of entry into contemporary Malay culture in Malaysia, especially as Muslim Malays constitute a clear majority of the population, and the *sharia* (or Islamic law) increasingly prevails in public life.

Throughout *In a Far Country*, Rajan consciously seeks a point of entry into Malay-defined Malaysia, or what he calls "some elusive rootedness" (37), but his subconscious self rebels against the prospect. He still feels himself to be an observer as much as, if not more than, a participant in national life. Besides, Rajan notes, "the idea that nothing of me will ever remain" is appalling. (38)

Indeed, for people like Rajan, Malaysian identity remains elusive in any concrete, programmatic, even human terms. Communal habits, reflects Rajan, "build up walls...(and) prevent us from knowing each other, knowing ourselves."(39) If, as Maniam himself affirms, "the problem for the Malaysian writer is in making the crossover to the other cultures, to get to know better the people of other races to be able to write about them,"(40) then that problem remains, after all the effort of *In A Far Country*. Instead, the novel offers another return to Hindu verities in the quest for a mystical light that is beyond and above all earthly existence and travail. Again Rajan asserts:

"I see the light. It is the light of pure  
living. It is there shining all around and into  
me. There is no ego, no self-interest, no

loyalty to all the people I've known; only  
the desire to contain that light within me and  
to take it out into the world. For it is the light  
of intelligence, not the darkness of the limited  
mind." (41)

Echoing the character, Naina, in *The Return*, Rajan has begun to turn from worldly success to spiritual enlightenment, though not, he hopes, as a reclusive form of escapism. In fact, the transcendental theme of darkness into light is there from the very first chapter of *In A Far Country*, when the middle-aged Rajan goes into a bright room to begin his self-analysis. It is a culturally Hindu solution, rather than a narrow nationalist one that eventually beckons Rajan out of retrospection and angst.

Maniam's recent published story, "All I Had," is excerpted from the manuscript of *Delayed Passage*, the novel yet to be published overseas, and a testament to the personal potential of Hindu revivalism. In this beautifully crafted piece, which appeared in the journal *Manoa*, a languid, retired former academic routinely waits on his patio each day for the inevitable end to his earthly life. His wife is estranged and reserved, his son tragically and accidentally has been killed. Life seemingly has little purpose. Much to his surprise and delight, though, the arrival in the household of his daughter-in-law revitalizes the old man. He had once thought her not good enough for his son. But her youthful energy, her household efficiency and most importantly, her Hindu devotion when she joins his wife for *puja*, help to convince the old man that there is more to life than mere anticipation of death.

In the story “Haunting the Tiger”(1990), the dense jungles of this ‘fresh, green land’ of Malaysia furnish a crucial but elusive landscape. In this deep and wonderful story about the search for identity of a second-generation Indian immigrant, young Muthu tries to break from his immigrant father’s paternal influence, and become part of his new country. He goes with his friend, “Pak Zul” to catch a tiger in the jungle. He is surprised when Pak Zul tells him that the tiger is, in fact, all around him in the natural environment and the spirit of the land. But Muthu refuses to wear the tiger’s stripes, a fact, which leaves him somehow empty, and troubles him until the end of his days.

## **Conclusion**

In V S Naipaul’s memorable phrase, Maniam is acutely aware of what it is “to be Indian in a non-Indian world” (42), and yet as well to be cosmopolitan in a polity that is narrowly nationalistic in a Malayo-Muslim sense. Reminiscent of the Biblical reference to the man who squandered his youth in a far country, Maniam’s second novel raises the dreadful question of whether Indians have merely wasted their talents in the Malaysian landscape. In the title story “Arriving”, from Maniam’s 1995 collection, it is at the neighborhood coffee shop that Krishnan debates the meaning of the term *pendatang* with the other characters, Mat, Wong, Teng, and Francis Lim. They are old, good friends whom, it is said, “were connected, web-like, to a round marble table that reflected the turning fan and the still glaze of the tea pot.” (43) However, the emotive turn of the debate seems likely to destroy this friendship, especially between the Malay character, Mat, and the Indian character, Krishnan. Seemingly, the story allows for a more optimistic conclusion that life itself is, for everyone, a continuous process of arriving. The optimism crucially assumes, though, that amiable inter-ethnic debate

can continue in Malaysia. More likely is a retreat behind communal walls, if in fact they have ever been relinquished deep down in the first place.

Communalism, the situation where an individual's ultimate loyalty and affection is given to his or her ethnic group, permeates the Tamil family at the heart of *The Return*. On one hand, it helps provide personal identity and cultural vitality in a new land, at least for a while until memory fades, and nostalgia and a mournful sense of cultural loss take over. On the other hand, an aspect of Tamil communalism such as caste restrains the upward social mobility, occupational choice, and material success that the new circumstances of Malaya/Malaysia warranted and encouraged. There are splinters in the vision of diaspora. For every one Ravi who got away, many more were left behind to languish in what Maniam himself called an environment of "the estate houses, the rubber trees and the red, laterite road that led away from the main, tar road into remoteness." (44) As the agonized Naina tells his son, Ravi:

"Can't you see? We can make all the money, get all the learning.

But these are useless if our house pillars don't sink into the clay  
of the land." (45)

Ravi, of course, has long concluded that the clay of Malaysian land is not for people like him. Maniam is acutely aware that a noxious compound of poverty, oppression, frustration and marginality can well accompany the cultural integrity of diaspora. Beyond the personal landscapes of the individual, the prospects of South Indian diaspora are indeed bleak. Maniam's fiction conveys a profound, haunted sense of cultural loss, and of never having arrived at a secular alternative. For too many Indian Malaysians, diaspora is both inescapable and acutely problematic.

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## NOTES

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