

MALAYSIA AS MYTH IN K S MANIAM'S **IN A FAR COUNTRY**

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In his witty, elegant overview of Southeast Asian affairs, *An Eye for the Dragon*, published in 1987, the journalist, Dennis Bloodworth, entitled one of his chapters "The Mythical Malaysians." (1) By this phrase, he meant the profound, and perhaps even intractable, difficulties that exist in carving a nation called Malaysia out of three of the world's major cultural traditions, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, as well as the influential colonial heritage bequeathed by Britain. It largely remains the case that the ethnic group into which a young Malaysian is born determines his or her chances or prospects in life. Despite the undoubted successes of the Malaysian Government's New Economic Policy and the boldness of Prime Minister Mahathir's **Vision 2020**, this ethnic variable remains intractable. In particular, for most Malaysians of Indian descent, the chances are few and the prospects are limited. In 1990, there were 1.5 million ethnic Indians in Malaysia, some 8% of the country's population, but their existence is regarded, in Suhaini Aznam's apt phrase, "almost as an afterthought." (2) Even Dennis Bloodworth substantially left the Malaysian Indian community out of his excellent 1987 analysis, preferring to focus on the numerically larger Malays and Chinese. The additional presence of some 1.2 million illegal, unskilled, immigrant workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh in contemporary Malaysia has exacerbated the displacement of Malaysian Indians from traditional occupations.

In 1984, the highly regarded Malaysian Indian novelist, K S Maniam, poignantly reflected that the life of his particular community was "a straining towards achievement that does not end in fulfilment." (3) Maniam, who was born in 1942, and has recently retired from the post of Associate Professor of English at the University of Malaya, has strained and achieved more than most. Last year, Greg Sheridan from *The Australian* newspaper dubbed Maniam as simply Malaysia's "leading English-language novelist," and as the composer of "beautiful, haunting, understated" works.(4) To date, he is the author of two substantial novels, numerous short stories, plays, essays, and reviews, all of which affirm what Edward Said calls "a fundamental liberationist energy that animates the wish to be independent, to speak freely and without the burden of unfair domination."(5) Maniam's first novel, *The Return* (1981) was essentially an autobiographical hymn to Indian ethnicity on Malaysian soil in fictive terms, furnishing a Tamil Indian perspective on Malaysia from a small town and rubber estate on the north of the peninsula. *In a Far Country* (1993), Maniam's second sustained work of fiction, takes on nothing less than the conceptual construction of Malaysia itself. It is an awesome effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born Krishnan Subramaniam in 1942, K S Maniam is of Hindu, Tamil and working-class background. His birthplace was Bedong in Kedah, north Malaysia, and he was the descendant of a grandmother who had migrated from India to the Malay Peninsula around 1916. Maniam was raised in a hospital compound, where his father was the hospital 'dhobi' or laundryman, and 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

estate workers. 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 radically to alter the course of his life. Decades later, Maniam recalled that the Tamil school at Bedong had taken place in a "primitive hall ... sitting in the middle of nowhere." There was an atmosphere of fear, where the principal teacher "beat the Tamil Primer and elementary arithmetic into our heads with a heavy, brass-ruled ferule".(6) By contrast, he notes, there was "something ethereal about being in an English school." (7) After completing English-medium schooling in 1960, he spent a few months as pupil-teacher there, and then left for India, where he was briefly to study medicine. From India, he went to England to study teacher education. During his stay 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:

"The Brinsford Lodge society was a truly Malaysian society in that everyone, irrespective of his or her race and culture, shared a common spirit of living together. There was hardly any racial prejudice or cultural intolerance. For a would-be writer this experience was not only necessary but vital for it allowed him entry into other personalities, cultures and languages." (8)

But Brinsford was far 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.

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.(9) However, it is an argument of this paper that the Indian plantation-small town frontier of Kedah, together with its intense Hindu spirituality, has constituted the main "core" centre to Maniam's life and work, and provides a vivid, ingrained integrity to his creative achievement. As Fawzia Mustafa fairly asserts about the intricate, authentic linkage between literature and society:-

"The historical circumstances and discursive fields in which and from which a writer learns ...and in which he participates - and sometimes changes - do provide helpful references with which to understand his or her work." (10)

The Malaysian plantation and its nearby towns constitute for Maniam what the major writer of the American South, William Faulkner, liked to call the "old ineradicable rhythm .. the fundamental passions and obsessions that fired writer and culture into life - animating them, inspiring them sometimes, and, at others, debilitating or even crippling them." (11) For Maniam, notes the Malaysian literary critic, Margaret Yong, Kedah is not merely a name on the map of his fiction, but rather "Kedah's geography valorizes a complete territory identifiably his own." (12)

K S Maniam usually writes within the realist genre, though he is not afraid of stylistic experimentation. Dreams and

flashbacks frequent his prose. In his first published story, "Ratnamuni" (from *Malaysian Short Stories*), he employs interior dramatic monologue to convey the whole story, and he repeats this technique in the one-act play *The Sandpit* (1987). There is, too, a discernible metaphysical strain to his work. In successive interviews about his work, Maniam has expressed a quest for the absorption of an individual self, or selves, into a larger, transcendent whole.(13)

ABOUT THE TEXT: *In A Far Country*

An ambitious work in thematic terms, Maniam's second novel takes place on the broad canvas of the various communities of independent Malaysia. Because of his cosmopolitan experience, he is aware of the perils of regarding culture as no more than a "defensive little patch" or "protective enclosure." (14) Instead, says Maniam, *In A Far Country* "commits itself to bringing cultures and societies into collision with one another and learning from that encounter. Not only does the protagonist have to learn about other societies and personalities, the writer too has to steep himself in the involved cultures so as to make his work convincing."(15) It is also technically an intricate and difficult work. Public and private, past and present, dream and consciousness, present and flashback, light and dark, variously succeed each other in a whirl of juxtaposition. With its collection of notes, letters, memories, and meditations, *In A Far Country* tries to depart from the genre of social realism, although it is still the case that some of its best episodes contain dense description. Like R K Narayan and his Malgudi, William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, Thomas Hardy and Wessex, even V S Naipaul and Trinidad, Maniam writes most convincingly about the Kedah he knows so well as complete insider.

The principal character and narrator, Rajan, 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" (16), 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, yearning for some transcendental light above and beyond mundane communal and material preoccupations, but really most convincing when he reminisces over the plantation estate of his boyhood. His memories are overwhelmingly negative.

One of eight children, Rajan recalls a permanently aggrieved mother and a father sodden with toddy for most of the days and nights, a grim picture of "limp helplessness." (17) Rajan believes that the only significant event in his father's entire life was his original "escape from India to Malaysia" (18), but even then there had been little heroism in that particular immigrant experience. 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." (19)

Once in Kedah, the father feels trapped, helpless, 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." (20)

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. Even by the age of 13, Rajan yearns to escape the "the bareness and harshness of my surroundings." (21) 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.

In his adult years, Rajan meets up with Lee Shin, a Chinese business colleague, and decides to make a detailed, sociological-type "study" of him. 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 Chinese culture into Malaysian soil. "He just wanted to be left alone," Rajan reflects wistfully on the futility of Lee Shin's ultimate goal. (22) 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 Malay community's traditional, mystical attitude to the landscape. However, despite several forays into the deepest *ulu*, Rajan doesn't actually come face-to-face with this tiger, and in fact runs away from the prospect. Zulkifli gently reminds him, "You don't have ancestors here." (23) Significantly, 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.

Malaysian identity, then, 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." (24) 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," (25) 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." (26)

Like a key 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. Within this context, concepts such as national identity seem unnecessary, even irrelevant. 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 likewise significant that, at the end of the novel, Rajan has managed to achieve a reconciliation with his spouse,

indicative of the efficacy of human action on an individual, microcosmic level as contrasted with a broader social or national realm.

Stylistically, there are some awkward moments in this text. In direct speech, for instance, it is difficult to accept that Rajan's barely literate, estate-bound father would employ complex adjectives such as "honey-dripping," "gossip-diseased," "hope-giving," or "insect-gnawing," especially when in an inebriated rage. A firmer editorial pen was needed on this kind of unnecessarily intricate passage. The plot of the novel, too, verges on diffusion, with significant repetition and divergence, even into barely disguised political commentary. The latter affords a rare instance of bawdy humour as political satire in the text, when the stubborn goat, Mani, reappears behind the podium on which visiting government ministers sit and speak, and irreverently neighs and passes wind with hilarious results.

Maniam himself believes that *In A Far Country* "raises more questions than provides answers." (27)

CONCLUSION

K S Maniam's lonely pursuit of literary excellence and transcendence faces an added obstacle in that, by writing in English, even the hybrid form of Malaysian English, he is officially denied entry into the privileged realm of "national" literature as expressed in Bahasa Malaysia. Instead, he must remain in the side-pool of "communal literature", where, in Kee Thuan Chye's words, there is "a limited market, a dwindling audience, and no government encouragement." (28) In V S Naipaul's memorable phrase, Maniam is acutely aware of what it is "to be Indian in a non-Indian world" (29), and yet as well to be cosmopolitan in a nationalistic polity. Reminiscent of the Biblical

reference to the man who quandered his youth in a far country, this novel raises the dreadful question of whether Indians have merely wasted their talents in the Malaysian landscape. For Maniam, Malaysia is indeed a mythical creation.

NOTES

1. Bloodworth, D. *An Eye for the Dragon: Southeast Asia Observed, 1954-1986*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1987, p. 299.
2. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7th June, 1990, p. 15.
3. *Ibid*, 26 July, 1984, p. 30.
4. *The Australian*, 26th August, 1996, p. 9.
5. Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994, p. xxiii.
6. Maniam, K S. "In Search of a Centre," Unpub. Paper delivered at a Seminar on "Malaysian Writing: The Writers Speak," during the 26th Singapore International Festival of Books and Book Fair, Singapore, September, 1994.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*, p. 6.
10. Mustafa, F. *V.S. Naipaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 10.
11. Gray, R. *The Life of William Faulkner*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. xii.
12. Yong, M. "Ring of Cosmic Fire: Temporal Strategies and Narrative Consciousness in *The Return*." *SARE*, 23 (1991), p. 973.
13. Kee Thuan Chye. *Just in so many words: views, reviews and other things*. Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1992, p. 15.
14. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 49, xiv.
15. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," p. 14.
16. Maniam, K S. *In A Far Country*. London: Skoob Pacifica Publishing, 1993, p. 3.
17. *Ibid*, p. 4.
18. *Ibid*.
19. *Ibid*, p. 5.
20. *Ibid*, p. 7.
21. *Ibid*, p. 5.
22. *Ibid*, p. 161.
23. *Ibid*, p. 101.
24. *Ibid*, p. 157.
25. Kee, *Just in so many words*, p. 15.
26. Maniam, *In A Far Country*, p. 153.

27. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," p. 14.
28. Kee, *Just in so many words*, p. 101.
29. Cited in Mustafa, *Naipaul*, p. 13

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