

A FEMININE PERSPECTIVE ON MALAYSIAN IDENTITY IN
K. S. MANIAM'S *BETWEEN LIVES*

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The distinguished Indian Malaysian author, K.S. Maniam, issued his third novel, entitled *Between Lives*, in 2003. Published by Maya Press in Malaysia, *Between Lives* adds to Maniam's already substantial body of literary work that includes numerous plays, no less than four collections of short stories, as well as the acclaimed novels *The Return* (1981) and *In A Far Country* (1993). The issue of identity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society is a central concern of Maniam's writings.(1) The third novel continues Maniam's exploration of Malaysian-ness, but this time from a consciously feminine perspective.

About the Author

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 *The Return*, first 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 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 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.

However, 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. (2)

About the Novel

Between Lives is set in familiar territory for K. S. Maniam, namely contemporary urban and regional Malaysia, and specifically the experiences of an extended Indian Malaysian family. Like his two previous novels, *Between Lives* is bound up with the vexed issue of Indian participation in twentieth century Malaysia. In *The Return*, an English-educated school-teacher, Ravi, returns to his birth-place of Bedong in Kedah, and re-engages with his Hindu cultural roots that are emphatically not Malaysian. Maniam's first novel was essentially an autobiographical hymn to Indian ethnicity on Malaysian soil in fictive terms. For instance, there is scant, if any, reference in *The Return* to the other main ethnic groups that live in the country.

Rajan, the principal character of Maniam's second novel, *In A Far Country*, is a business executive undergoing a mid-life crisis. Having devoted his

life to achieving success in Malaysia, Rajan has been abruptly reminded of his alien cultural heritage when an older Malay character, Zulkifli, reminds him, "You don't have ancestors here." (3) Maniam's sustained work of fiction thereby takes on nothing less than the conceptual construction of Malaysia itself.

In addition, both of Maniam's previous novels have a male protagonist who, perforce, views the world through masculine eyes. It is a particular twist, then, that the main characters of *Between Lives* are female, and that the vantage point of the entire novel is likewise female. Firstly, there is Sumitra, the young social worker and urban sophisticate, who tells the story. Sumitra is highly educated and multi-lingual, a beer-drinking reader of glossy fashion magazines, who initially defines herself as a modern woman unbound by cultural tradition. There is the main subject of Sumitra's work, a poor, rural Indian woman named Sellamma, who is destined for an old person's home but exerts a strange, compelling fascination for Sumitra. Sellamma knows that the land she lives on has been scheduled for acquisition and development as a theme park, and she refuses to move. There is Sumitra's grandmother, a strong, narrow, doughty defender of cultural tradition whom Sumitra does not take

seriously, and who affords the family a measure of comic relief. There is Sumitra's mother, Gowri, the still-recovering victim of physical abuse by her father. There are the close colleagues from Sumitra's workplace, Christine and Aishah, who choose to stand beside Sumitra as she defends the land she comes to inherit from Sellamma against the rapacious developers. It is this final, moving stand by the three young women, Indian, Chinese, and Malay, united in defence of a beloved, natural landscape that offers something of K S Maniam's vision of what Malaysia might be. "Our life," cautions Sellamma, "cannot be traded for anything." (4) It is in their attachment to the landscape, Maniam suggests, that all Malaysians, irrespective of ethnic group, can find a legitimate place in the country.

About the Themes

The story is told by Sumitra. It focuses on one of her cases as a social worker, an old woman of Indian ethnicity named Sellamma. The Department of Social Reconstruction, for which Sumitra works, is determined to move Sellamma from her own property to an old person's home. Then her property will be handed over to the developers of a theme park. Sumitra's brief is to persuade the

old woman to vacate. Her fluency in Tamil is regarded as a plus in communication with the old woman. Initially, Sumitra affects a casual, complacent and confident voice.

Sumitra calls on all her linguistic skills and vocational training and adopts an empathetic approach to the difficult old woman, trying to find the psychological key that will unlock her attachment to the land. Sumitra is also naggingly persistent, visiting Sellamma and her faithful dog, Nanda, at least every day over a sustained period. On first meeting, the old woman is distant and wary, but, to her pleasant surprise, Sumitra also finds her to be "an almost ageless woman" who "really knows the land she treads on." (5) Moreover, as she painstakingly explores the 'nooks and crannies' of Sellamma's life in Malaysia, Sumitra becomes immersed in the world-view of her subject, including her affection for the lore and rituals of Indian folk-culture, and the past experiences of Sellamma's family as they moved from poverty-stricken plantation labour to rural land-ownership under British colonial rule. Sumitra discovers that Sellamma is no mere aging occupant of property, but a spiritual presence in the landscape with its jungle-clad interior, flowing stream of water, and red laterite soil. As

Sumitra comes to realise about her subject:
"She's here all over the place." (6) Again to her surprise, Sumitra develops an overwhelming affection for the old woman, her dog, and her place. "I allowed myself to fall under the spell of a living ghost," she acknowledges. (7) Sellamma extends hospitality to her interrogator, and before long, they are digging the garden together, bathing together in the river, and reorganising Sellamma's home and belongings. In fact, Sellamma seems to regard Sumitra as her long-lost sister. Ironically, it is Sumitra rather than Sellamma who is challenged by their association. The younger woman comes to query her very vocation as social worker. "Had I become only words, just empty gestures?" she asks herself. (8) Eventually, Sumitra leaves her own comfortable house and her office in the Department to move in with Sellamma. When Sellamma becomes very ill and dies, she transfers ownership of her property to Sumitra. However, the legality of this ownership proves problematic in the face of the political and economic clout of the big, rather sinister property developers. Not even Sumitra's call on the influential Malay connections of her colleague, Aishah, can resolve the physical standoff which concludes the novel. Nevertheless, Sellamma has become Sumitra's ancestor in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Stylistically, *Between Lives* is a rich and complex work, combining past and present through memory, flashbacks, myth, history, and contemporary description. The pace is fast, the tone almost entirely serious. The novel is set in various locations, starting with Sellamma's property, Sumitra's home, the Departmental office with its modern technology, personal tensions, and political tussles, but always coming back to the land on which Sellamma, and later Sumitra, dwell. For a male author like K S Maniam, this unrelenting feminine perspective constitutes a remarkable, innovative achievement in the annals of Malaysian literature in English.

On her deathbed, Sellamma speaks these words:
"Now I will truly belong to the land, Amma." (9)
It is in her robust defence of Sellamma's inheritance that Sumitra redefines her identity in accordance with place and tradition. Notably, she is a much stronger, grounded person and authentic participant in Malaysia at the end of the novel.

NOTES

1. Cf. Wicks, Peter. "Maniam's Malaysian Vision." *Asian Profile*, 25, 5, (October, 1997), pp. 387-396; and "Malaysia as Myth in K.S.Maniam's *In A Far Country*." *Asian Culture Quarterly*, 26, 4 (Winter, 1998), pp. 57-64.
2. 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, September, 1994.
3. Maniam, K.S. *In A Far Country*. London: Skoob Pacific Pubs., 1993, p. 101.
4. Maniam, K.S. *Between Lives*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2003, p. 298.
5. Ibid., pp. 3-4.
6. Ibid., p. 332.
7. Ibid., p. 8.
8. Ibid., p. 224.
9. Ibid., p. 316.