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Maniam's Malaysian Vision



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The ethnic group into which a young Malaysian is born largely determines his or her chances or prospects in life. Despite the successes of the New Economic Policy and the boldness of 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."¹

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."²

Maniam, who was born in 1942, and is now 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.³ 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."⁴

This paper is an attempt to understand Maniam's creative output in terms of his life, his place, and his times, especially from the sustained fiction of the novels. 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. The texts themselves also 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. K S Maniam's vision of Malaysia emphasises the fragility of belonging for recent immigrant groups, as well as the marginality of Indian Malaysians.

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

1. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7th June, 1990, p 15.

2. *Ibid*, 26 July, 1984, p 30.

3. *The Australian*, 26th August, 1996, p 9.

4. Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994, p xxiii.

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".⁵ By contrast, he notes, there was "something ethereal about being in an English school."⁶ 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 there, 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."⁷

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. However, it is the 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 Edward Said fairly asserts about the intricate, authentic linkage between literature and society:-

"I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience ..."⁸

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

5. 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.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p 6.

9. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p xxiv.

10. Gray, R. *The Life of William Faulkner*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p xii.

them sometimes, and, at others, debilitating or even crippling them.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

About the Context

According to S Arasaratnam, the “least influential and least visible” of the Indians in colonial Malaya were the “vast humanity of plantation labour spread through the rubber, tea and oil palm estates of the Federated States.”¹² These people were the descendants of Hindu Tamils who had been 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. It was Ravindra K Jain who in 1970 first systematically delineated the typical living and conditions of most Malaysian Indians in his detailed sociological study of the Pal Melayu rubber plantation adjacent to the Straits of Malacca. Importantly, Jain portrayed the 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.¹³ Chandra Muzaffar called the plantation economy itself an “almost insurmountable obstacle”¹⁴ From the pre-dawn muster of tappers at 5.30 am to the end of latex collection at 2 pm, six days per week, the estate defined the material circumstances of its inhabitants. In 1970, the workers of Pal Melayu were lowly-paid, basically-housed, caste-ridden (either sudra-labourer or harijan-untouchable), male-dominated, poorly-educated, socially immobile, and stuck in the ulu. Jain’s dismal findings about Indian estate life have been confirmed in further studies by Wiebe and Mariappen in 1978, by Suhaini Aznam in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in 1990, and by Sandhu and Mani in 1993. The essential, vulnerable marginality of Malaysia’s 1.5 million ethnic Indians continues to be emphasized, and for the many who remain on plantation estates, high levels of apathy, indebtedness, drunkenness, drug addiction, and domestic violence continue to be reported. In one especially moving report which appeared in the *New Straits Times* during June, 1995, five Malaysian Indian women, all in their early 20s and from oil-palm estates near Batang Berjuntai in Selangor, had just died of AIDS. These women had been living in the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, forced off the estates into drug-taking and prostitution by their husbands. Before their desperately untimely deaths, they had all been married with children. The plantation estate is, indeed, a world to escape. For Maniam, it was fundamentally “stifling and sick,”¹⁵ but he has also been able to affirm that the response of the estate working class to their oppressive conditions “provides interesting possibilities for defining what the human personality is all about ..I see much potential in these people ..”¹⁶

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 dis-

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11. Yong, M. “Ring of Cosmic Fire: Temporal Strategies and Narrative Consciousness in *The Return*.” *SARE*, 23 (1991), p 973.
 12. Arasaratnam, S. “Malaysian Indians: The Formation of Incipient Society,” *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed K S Sandhu & A Mani. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Times Academic Press, 1993, p 191.
 13. Jain, Ravindra K. *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970, pp viii, 89.
 14. Muzaffar, Chandra. “Political Marginalization in Malaysia,” *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, p. 212.
 15. Yong, “Ring of Cosmic Fire,” p 973.
 16. Kee Thuan Chye. *Just in so many words: views, reviews and other things*. Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1992, p 15.

cernible 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.¹⁷

The First Novel: *The Return* (1981)

Maniam's first novel *The Return* was published by Heinemann Asia in 1981. A young, English-educated Malaysian Indian comes back from further education in Britain to confront the dual realities of the Malaysian landscape and his Indian communal family. The two are barely compatible, for the principal characters spend most of the novel in a futile attempt to put down Indian roots in Malaysian soil. Indeed, the early chapters constitute a hymn to Indian ethnicity. Maniam's evocation of his family's distant but glamorous Indian past on a sub-continent the narrator had never then seen provides dramatic, ironic contrast to the grim conditions where Malaysia's Tamils actually lived on the rubber estates near Bedong. As at least 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 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."¹⁸ 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. He writes of Saraswathi, the Hindu goddess of fertility, procreation, and purification, as well as writing and learning. He writes, too, of events like Ponggal, the first day of the first month in the Hindu calendar, 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 burden). Deepavali, the Hindu festival of lights, is held on the day of the New Moon between mid-October and mid-November. 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 symbolise 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 serve to bring together the Indian population, and help assert its identity as an ethnic minority.

There is no more substantive symbolisation of an Indian past than in the character of Maniam's grandmother, the woman who became known as Periathai, or Big Mother, the pedlar who had "a firm gait to her walk"¹⁹ and a hump in her back, so symbolic of endurance, that eventually osmosed into a terminal tumour. For the youthful Ravi (the narrator based roughly on Maniam himself), the determined, self-reliant Periathai took on mythical proportions. The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of narrative as "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history."²⁰ 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 she had "no papers, only a vague belief, and a dubious loyalty."²¹

17. *Ibid.*

18. Yong, "Ring of Cosmic Fire," p 973.

19. Maniam, K S. *The Return*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1991, p 1.

20. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p xiii.

21. Maniam, *The Return*, p. 9.

Formal education is another key ingredient in *The Return*. Ravi first attended the Tamil-medium primary school on Riverside Estate near Bedong. There he found Murugesu, who turned out to be more 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 lines of curving, intricate Tamil writing that “unfolded an excitingly unexpected and knowable world.”²² After a year, however, Ravi was sent to the English-medium school in Sungai Petani, with its colonial architecture, efficient Chinese clerks, silent rooms, rows of desks, square-lined exercise books, and ubiquitous pictures of daffodils. Above all, though, the English school 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.”²³ 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 apart, and he came to view his Indian domesticity with disdain, employing negative terms like “darkness,” “futility,” “filthy,” and “primitive,” (the last is an adjective that appears twice in the relevant portion of the text).²⁴ When his father, Naina, eventually agreed to Ravi’s request for a toothbrush, the Chinese shop-keeper cannily observed that Ravi would be “a real Englishman now.”²⁵ When thrashed by the Tamil laundry-supervisor for talking with some visiting English children, Ravi resolved in one dramatic moment to escape from Bedong. “I turned away from the God who ruled my people.”²⁶

It was his father’s considerable success in the laundry business, the additional work of his mother and step-mother on Riverside Estate, as well as his own educational achievements in secondary school that eventually made this escape from Bedong, Kedah, and the Malay peninsula possible. Rather than remaining just “a dhobi’s son” who “could never dream of being more”²⁷, Ravi obtained a rare scholarship from the Indian High Commission to finish school and undertake two years of teacher-training in England. Sadly, though, this very achievement meant a further break with his parents. Ravi did not share his father’s desperate urge to “drive some stake into the country”²⁸, nor did he comprehend his father’s final change of appearance, symbolic residence on the jungle fringes, or tragic assertion of dignity through self-immolation by fire. It was really only in death, as his ashes were scattered in the river, that Naina became a part of Malaysia.

There is some debate as to the factual basis of *The Return*, with some critics terming it as autobiographical, others as but a loose fit. Maniam himself denies that it is his own life-story. Any affinities are, he says, “coincidences rather than events.”²⁹ Maniam’s particular attachment to his own grandmother certainly bears fruit in the character of Periathai. In his introduction to the Skoob Books Edition, C W Watson regards *The Return* as the story of “the poignant journey of self-discovery of an Indian boy growing up in Malaya and gradually moving apart from his fam-

22. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 53,71.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

26. *Ibid.*, p 84.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

29. Yong, “Ring of Fire,” p 972.

30. Watson, C W. “Introduction” to *The Return*, by K S Maniam. Skoob Pacifica Anthology No 1: Southeast Asia Writes Back! London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1993, p 238.

ily and immediate surroundings"³⁰. Maniam himself is rather more cautious, observing that the "protagonist Ravi's life may bear resemblances to my own but they are only resemblances. I believe there is always a dialogue between the writer and the work he produces."³¹ Consider the decision to take young Ravi out of the Tamil-medium school in Bedong and send him to an English school in Sungei Petani. The novel attests that it was Ravi's stepmother, Karupi, who was the decisive influence here (see pp. 16-17), but elsewhere Maniam says that going to English school was his own assertive wish to find a "centre" of fulfilment away from the rubber estate. Hating what he terms "the isolation of a backwater cultural existence", Maniam recalls that he "stood up and said I would go to an English school or no school at all."³² There is, in any case, little doubt that Maniam was able to attend English school because of his parents' dual incomes from laundry and plantation, and from his father's own upward social mobility.

Although readers are constrained to view Bedong from the viewpoint of the escaping, Westernizing narrator, Ravi, he is actually not the most captivating or intriguing character in the novel. Rather, this honour goes to the semi-mythical grandmother Periathai, she of the Nataraja lamp and hump on the back, and Naina, the industrious, successful laundry operator, who discovers an intense personal spirituality and, in the spirit of the real Hindu ascetic, or sanyasi, removes himself from worldly concerns in pursuit of inner calm and tranquillity of mind.

The Second Novel: In A Far Country

A rather more ambitious work in thematic terms, Maniam's second novel takes place on a much broader canvas, nothing less than the various communities of independent Malaysia. He is aware of the perils of regarding culture as no more than a "defensive little patch" or "protective enclosure." (33) In *In A Far Country*, says Maniam, "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."³⁴ It is also technically a more 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, Maniam writes most convincingly about the Kedah he knows so well as complete insider.

The principal character and narrator, Rajan, is again a Malaysian Indian who has come out of a remote estate world and achieved success, this time 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, 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.

31. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," p 10.

32. *Ibid*, p 3.

33. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, pp 49, xiv.

34. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," p 14.

35. Maniam, K S. *In A Far Country*. London: Skoob Pacifica Publishing, 1993, p 3.

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."³⁶ Rajan believes that the only significant event in his father's entire life was his original "escape from India to Malaysia"³⁷, 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."³⁸

Once in Kedah, the father feels trapped, helpless, impotent, condemned. Like Periathai and Naina in *The Return*, 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."³⁹

The rubber estates themselves were manifestly nothing like the fabulous mythological kingdoms uncovered by earlier Indian explorers across the Bay of Bengal. Even by the age of 13, Rajan yearns to escape the "the bareness and harshness of my surroundings."⁴⁰ 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 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.⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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."⁴³ 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

36. *Ibid*, p. 4.

37. *Ibid*.

38. *Ibid*, p. 5.

39. *Ibid*, p. 7.

40. *Ibid*, p. 5.

41. *Ibid*, p. 161.

42. *Ibid*, p. 101.

43. *Ibid*, p. 157.

44. Kee, *Just in So Many Words*, p 15.

able to write about them,"⁴⁴ 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; on 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."⁴⁵

Like Naina in Maniam's first novel, Rajan has begun to turn from worldly success to spiritual enlightenment, though not, he hopes, as a 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 first chapter 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 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," but that he has learnt "not to be possessive about a particular centre" presumably a centre such as a rubber estate, a dhobi shop, or even his beloved English language.⁴⁶

Conclusion

KS 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."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it would be absurd to suggest that Maniam has little to say about one of the three main communities which has helped fashion contemporary Malaysia, or indeed, in an ironic sense, about the limited process of national construction in his country.

45. Maniam, *In a Far Country*, p 153.

46. Maniam, "In Search of a Centre," p 14.

47. Kee, *Just in So Many Words*, p 101.

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