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CULTURAL IDENTITY IN K. S. MANIAM'S *RATNAMUNI*

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ABSTRACT

In his fiction, the Malaysian-Indian author, K. S. Maniam depicts the identity and culture of Malaysian-Indian. This is shaped with a collection of materials that are vital to keep the trace of ancestral identification marks, of retaining the status of being Indian, even though the land they live in is not India. In the new land the Indian community invests its new narrative of existence with a power structure to support the Diasporic Indian "self". In Maniam's reconstruction of the Indian immigrant experience in Malaysia, there are the difficulties that the community faced when trying to recreate this world. Maniam depicts the rites of the complicated cultural issues in a Diasporic Indian community. In his reconstruction of the Indian immigrant experience of Malaya, One can see these previously peripheral characters as the agents of the Diasporic identity that the present day Malaysian-Indian has inherited. The passage of such identity formation, however, is demonstrated to be filled with the many snares of both colonial and postcolonial experiences. The present study examines Maniam's short story, *Ratnamuni*, from a Diaspora perspective. This study shows the way in which Maniam symbolically depicts the culture of a nation in Diaspora.

Keywords: culture, Diaspora, identity, Malaysian-Indian, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

The history of Malaysia, its development from colonialism to post-colonialism, and its movement towards multiculturalism are all important in appreciating not only the nation at a particular period of time of its development, but also the psyche of its individuals and its authors. Obviously, this reconstruction can never be wholly and inclusively a smooth and balanced affair, especially where the issues of gender, culture, race and identity are considered. Yet, the key element is that the power of narrativity in the hands of postcolonial writers allows for the reinsertion of the subaltern into written history.

By looking back at history, one can find that Malaysian literature develops in its own root that Malay language has been used as a medium in writing. Malay writers, particularly, have talked about issues on patriotisms and nation building. However, the emergence of Malaysian writers from other races began and rose together with the development and modernization in Malaysia. Malaysia literature in English has developed over fifty years which is after the country independence.

Concerning the Malaysian writers that come from different races, their literary works are also varied and touch the important multicultural issues ranging from broad questions of identity such as sense of home/homelessness, gender, language, multiculturalism and Diasporic perspective.

Multiculturalism is a challenging issue in contemporary Malaysia. Indeed, multiculturalism as a political and socio-cultural issue is discussed at various levels of community and in different areas of study. According to Hall and Gay (2003):

Multiculturalism - a portmanteau term for anything from minority discourse to postcolonial critique, from gay and lesbian studies to chicano/a fiction - has become the most charged sign for describing the scattered social contingencies that characterize contemporary *Kulturkritik* (p. 55).

In a multicultural community, the authors are responsible to the nation. In this relation, literary authors find themselves responsible to social heterogeneity, and such issues as culture, identity, history, language and gender, as “the management of diversity and difference through the bureaucratic mantra of race, class and gender encouraged the divisive rhetoric of being more marginal, more oppressed” (Mercer, 1992b, p. 33; as cited in Hall & Gay 2003, p. 97). Thus, issues of identity, race and culture require more attention in a multicultural society.

Subramaniam Krishnan (K. S. Maniam) the Malaysian-Indian writer illustrated such issues of identity, culture, and race in his fiction. Maniam was born in 1942. He is Hindu, Tamil and he was born in Kedah. Maniam's parents worked as rubber- tappers and while they were working, Maniam perceived the lifestyle of Tamils in Malaysia. He studied in Malaysia and worked as pupil- teacher for a few months before leaving for India where he studied medicine for a short while then he moved to England to study teacher education. After obtaining his certificate, he returned back to Malaysia and taught in different schools. He completed his BA in Arts/ English and continued his master in English Literature. He started his career in 1979 as a lecturer at the University of Malaya and was retired in 1997. He is a prolific writer and has many short stories, novels and plays.

According to Naipaul, Maniam knows what it is “to be Indian in a non-Indian world” (Naipaul, 1984, p. 42). Though Maniam writes mainly of the Malaysian-Indian community, the borders of his imagination, if one follows its footprints closely, do not move towards that ethnic community alone. Instead, at every juncture, they edge out of the environments of that communal world into the territory inhabited by the other communities sharing that same soil.

In his fiction, Maniam, depicts the identity and culture of Malaysian-Indian. This is shaped with a collection of materials that are vital to keep the trace of ancestral identification marks, of retaining the status of being Indian even though the land they live in is not India. In the new land the Indian community invests its new narrative of existence with a power structure to support the overseas Indian “self”. In Maniam’s reconstruction of the Indian immigrant experience in Malaysia, there are the difficulties that the community faced when trying to recreate this world. When one tries only to build on what was left in the past without any connection with the present, that world becomes only a shadow of what is beyond one’s reach. For most of the Indian community, it was impossible to return to India. They could never afford it. Reconstituting its image in a foreign land proved rather difficult as well. While many Diasporic Indian writers focus on the ways in which India was replicated in the foreign land, Maniam attempts to depict characters deeply committed to creating a new narrative of existence that embraced the world that they lived in.

Maniam depicts the rites of the complicated cultural issues in Diasporic Indian community. In his reconstruction of the Indian immigrant experience of Malaya, one can see these previously peripheral characters as the agents of the Diasporic identity that the present day Malaysian-Indian has inherited. The passage of such identity formation, however, is demonstrated to be filled with the many snares of both colonial and postcolonial experiences. Maniam shows the immigrant community struggling with the feat of keeping side of their Indian self and how they develop to engage with the spaces of the new land. He concerns the idea that communal memory is the most significant tool of restitution as it becomes the medium through which the lost narrative of the subaltern is reinstated in the present.

Maniam's literature is often presented through the view-point of Malaysian-Indian characters whose consciousness of their present is continually formed by their recognition of an Indian immigrant past. Often the narrative space is one where echoes of ancestral figures and voices constantly slip in and out of its terrain. As Maniam in his novel *In a Far Country* asserts:

As far as I can recall there had been only one great adventure in his life—his escape from India to Malaysia. There were times when he muttered and mumbled during his toddy-soaked carelessness, and it was through these moments of indiscretion that his story came through to me. Thinking back I realise that that was how he tried to pull himself out of his limp helplessness. The faint, flickering light and the night silence created shadows and echoes that could have been of another man and another place. The place was another country, India: the time, another era that comes though me in a strange way. Can memories be inherited? Can repetition make actual the past? (Maniam, 1984, p. 1)

In fact, Maniam depicts Diaspora and its effects on the characters who emigrated from India to Malaysia. Through his fiction, Maniam shows the nostalgia for the past and his land. The present study investigates Maniam's *Ratnamuni* from a Diaspora view-point. This study aims to show Maniam's concern of Diaspora through his symbolic depiction of culture.

Ratnamuni: A glimpse

Wicks (2002) argues that Maniam's novels show Indians who live in Malaysia, but think of what it could be if they were in their lands, and what it is now in reality. Maniam is usually regarded as a realistic writer and flashbacks and dreams are typical in his text. In his first short story, *Ratnamuni*, selected from a collection named *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and the Plays*, he uses interior dramatic monologue to narrate the story and such "narrative strategies as memory and story-telling" negotiate the sense of Diaspora (Nyman, 2009, p.109). In *Ratnamuni*, Maniam depicts interior lives of the characters who deal with their past and their relationships. He narrates the story of individuals in Diaspora. *Ratnamuni* is a story about a poor worker, Muniandy, who emigrates from India to Malaysia. He reveals the expectation, the depression, the shame and the predictable violence of his life. A tragic story has happened in his life, where he killed a man and this tragedy has pulled him out of an expression which makes his life plunge into darkness. At first, when Muniandy comes to Malaysia he only brings a beggar bundle with him, and at the end of the story when he surrenders himself to the police, he really becomes a beggar when he does not own anything with him. He is under depression when he does not understand why his wife killed herself. He remembers the time when his wife

had regretted before her death. Although Muniandy is a person with many bad habits, he still has the spiritual power through *uduku*, a special drum used by Hindus for their spiritual use. Muniandy begins the story with the following words:

Repot-kepot ayah. I cannot tell straight. This Bedong I stay all my life I did not come straight. When I was coming here – nothing. Only her – the *uduku*. That man in Madras wearing the uniform asks .e. What is this, man? Everybody carrying big boxes and things, you only a beggar's bundle?" I said, "The Lord Siva danced and made the world". (Maniam, 1984, p. 1)

Maniam reveals the awareness of spiritual experience in Diaspora. The references to the spiritual beliefs in Hindu religion, to his motherland and the way Muniandy worshiped God indicates his nostalgic mood for his past.

Symbolic presentation of culture in Diaspora

Diaspora originated from a Greek word meaning scattering and dispersion. For the first time Diaspora was mentioned in the Old Testament which examined Judaic history and the way Jews who have been in exile and away from their land Israel in biblical times (Chand, 2009). According to Jim Clifford, "Diaspora is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local" (as cited in Hall & Gay, 2003, p.92). Furthermore, Hall and Gay observe Diaspora "as a distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement". That is, Diaspora emphasizes the historically spatial fluidity and intentionality" (2003, p. 92)

Moreover, Diaspora can be related to the dispersion of people, culture and language from the place they are originated to the new place. For example, the Indians who moved from India to Malaysia in search of employment and other opportunities are considered as Diaspora. These people, who migrated to a new country, either willingly or by force, can create their new home, although they feel nostalgic towards the past that they had and their willingness to return to their own countries; therefore, their "subjectivity is formed in constant dialogue between the present reality and the baggage of the past" (Clammer, 2002, p. 23). Those who migrate to new lands change their culture and language according to the new land or try to keep all their traditional backgrounds. As a result of their migration, in Diasporic texts, the reader can follow the haunting presence of the mother land and feel the anguish of personal losses in characters. As the current article discusses, Muniandy moved from India to Malaya but he is unsatisfied with his situation. He laments the loss of his homeland and the relationships he had had with people of his own land. According to Eric Michaels "people's access to knowledge is determined in part by the places - of conception, birth, death and residence - from and by which they speak, for one is always speaking for and from a specific geography of such places. That is, subjectivity describes the points of attachment from which one experiences the world" (as cited in Hall & Gay, 101). Muniandy has no experience of the new land and all his knowledge is rooted in his mother land. In fact, Maniam depicts what it means to be Indian without being in India. He shows the difficulties the Indians go through when they are in a foreign country. Maniam chooses a Malaysian-Indian character who always looks backwards to his past. In fact, this dreaming of the past is a way to escape the harsh reality which "is continually being transformed and power enacted" (Hall & Gay, p.99).

Muniandy compares himself to Hanuman, the Simian featured god of the epic *Ramayana*. He talks of his first employment in the new land as a:

boat-rower ... carrying the men, women, children- strangers from one coast to the other coast in a gliding boat. The light making lines on the water. The people going from one darkness to another darkness. I am Hanuman the rowing monkey for them. (Maniam, 1984, p. 1)

Maniam symbolically shows the taboo of crossing of the dark waters that wash away all traces and all links with the ancestral land. However, Muniandy puts himself at the centre of this journey as a spiritual leader. This role concerns his only possession, the *uduku*, which Lord Siva holds in his hands as he dances. In *Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction: A Personal Reflection* (1987), Maniam argues that “*uduku* is capable, when played by a person in a state of ritual purity, of sending the player into trance and so reveal knowledge that is otherwise not usually available” (1987, p.220). In *Ratnamuni*, Muniandy has such a visionary power. By playing the *uduku*, he goes into a trance-like state and extracts information of an ethereal kind.

However, he is angry with the new region he entered and his anger is reflected in the way he pronounces the word “Ma- la- ya”. He remembers the time when he just arrived in the land and he had nothing except the *uduku* (Maniam, 1984). He remembers the first person who saw him laughed at his religious ideas as the religious backgrounds are different: “The Lord Siva danced and made the world. The man was laughing in the corner of his mouth” (Maniam, 1984, p. 7). The man laughed not only at his *uduku* but also his religious beliefs, but for Muniandy the *uduku* is symbol of his cultural background and whenever he plays it, he remembers his past and his land.

Nothing could satisfy him in this land and all the time he has a sense of nostalgia and remembers how he lived in his own country. As Clammer observed “the migrant can never have the same relationship to the land as can the native” (2002, p. 24). Muniandy cannot appreciate the nature as he feels detached from it.

Muniandy is very observant as he comes from another background and every movement and sound is strange to him. It is the cultural shock to him as he is not used to the situation yet. He should adapt himself with the new changes and have "negotiation of new understanding of reality", but he is not successful to absorb the new changes (Clammer, 2002, p.16). Besides the cultural differences, he also faces the religious differences. He can hear sounds from his *uduku* as if God talks to him.

In Malaya, Muniandy considers himself as “unwanted” (Maniam, 1984) as his language, culture, religion and his understanding of life are different. He finds himself as ‘other’. According to Hall (1990), “imposed selves which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common make us see and experience ourselves as other” (pp. 224-393). Such an idea of cultural identity is significant in all the post-colonial struggles having reshaped the world. Muniandy feels isolated and unwanted as he does not have anything in common with other people around him.

Maniam shows that history is not without its problems and he presents the harsher realities of life in the colonial plantation. He depicts the suicide of Muniandy’s wife, which in turn leads him to escape his predicament by turning to the destructive power of toddy. His life does indeed pursue the sequence of Lord Siva’s dance. It is after all as much creative as it is destructive. However, this time the conviction he had at the very beginning is lost:

When at last I think I have reached I must start again ... I won’t start again, I want to go back to the water. To be a line in the river that dances and is broken. I want to break and heal without knowing. I drink toddy in the evening. (Maniam, 1984, p. 7)

Through such self-imposed oblivion, he violates the law from the cosmic dancer to the dwarf of ignorance that is trampled in the sequence of the dance itself. He becomes a comical person; 'the big monkey dancer' that children began to make fun of, instead of the revered Hanuman mentioned to earlier.

Yet the sequence of ignorance does not last long. In what is now a style of Maniam's creative interpolation, cultural thought is transferred into the body of narrative. Muniandy understands that he has been charmed by *mayam* or illusion and that this has kept him from the true knowledge of his wife's suicide: "I am also part of the dance ... knowing I am only a dancer. I have to create so I can be destroyed to enter a greater creation" (Maniam, 1984, p. 13). Like Siva Nataraja, he must trample the dwarf of ignorance to release a higher consciousness of his identity in the new country. He becomes, symbolically, the *uduku* that he owns "My skin is ready to be drummed on" (Maniam, 1984, p. 17).

Consequently, the truth behind his wife's suicide is revealed. He discovers that she was raped by their neighbor, Muthiah. This revelation tramples in turn his ignorance of the actual predicament of his wife:

When my wife bent over me in the mornings I didn't listen to her words. The voice charmed a mayam over my ears. I was too happy to see the custom from the Big Country still used in my house. Now the suffering didn't come behind the truth. All the saying that had gone past a deaf ear was heard again. There was pain and contempt in them. (Maniam, 1984, p. 17)

Maniam in *Ratnamuni* draws explicitly from the resources of his Diasporic experience to fashion alternative cultural and historical politics. Although Maniam reveals the anguish and anxiety of this community as its members cling desperately to old, ancestral rituals, he does not present the Indians as a lost race, doomed to a life of futile mimicry on an alien land.

CONCLUSION

Diaspora refers to people's movement from one place to a new land, and it has its own historical background of the movements of the Jews for the first time. Although Diaspora is a border-crossing issue, it is also related to racial and cultural issues. As the people move to a new area, they may have some problems with mingling with other people, cultures and races. They consider their homeland as their true home and the place to which they finally will return. This paper examined *Ratnamuni* in the light of Diaspora and the way Muniandy as the main character of the novel deals with some problems when he moved to the new land. Thus, the presence of the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia is based on the formation of an identity through movement from an ancient tradition to a new land. The overarching theme of Maniam's work of fiction from the discussion is remarkably located within the debate of home and belonging. It pursues thus that at the heart of this discourse one often finds the attendant referent of residence, the physical house itself. Furthermore, Maniam's *Ratnamuni* represents the concern of the people who struggle for a better understanding of their culture, race and sense of self in Diaspora.

Consequently, it is necessary to understand the features of cultural changes in Diasporic region and the reflections of local people to this bewildering range of forces, pressures and influences. Thus, the comparative, region-wide study of culture is

significant to understanding of identity and its construction and transformation in a new culture and region.

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