

**Diasporic Translocations: Difference, Multiculturalism and
National Identity in Malaysia**

By:

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Postcolonial Diasporas

Fifty years or so after the inception of postcolonial studies as a field of inquiry, the issues of nation and narration, migration and dislocation, place and displacement remain a major paradigm of postcolonial concern and critique. The processes of mobility, transfer, adaptation, connectivity, reinvention, and change inherent to these postcolonial realities are challenging and transforming traditional understandings of identity, belonging, homeland and the cultural boundaries of the nation. A crucial dimension of these contemporary postcolonial realities is rooted in the processes of diaspora – dislocation, relocation, *translocation* – be it those unleashed by the population transfers of the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries or the post-World War II, and ongoing, migrations of people into North America, Australia, and Western Europe. Indeed, these large-scale migrations of people and their particular histories of displacement have made the process of cultural translocation a complex form of signification.

It is within the context of these diasporic translocations – the historical displacements generated by colonialism as well as the ongoing global movements and migrations of peoples, and the complex areas of human experience and identification to

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which these movements give rise, as well as the creative and connective possibilities engendered by these movements – that I locate my conceptual grounds to examine the question of belonging and national identity in Malaysia.

While the title of my paper may appear to valorize the “diasporic” over the “postcolonial”, I wish to emphasize that my use of diaspora as a conceptual and analytical category is implicitly marked by the presence of a postcolonial discourse. That is, I employ diaspora as a politics of resistance that, like the postcolonial, encompasses the ethical imperative to problematise the cultural, linguistic, and racial categories which enabled the formulation and subsequent propagation of imperialist ideologies during the period of European colonial expansion. Why I prefer the use of the term “diaspora” over “postcolonial”, however, is in light of the consideration that the postcolonial project, as signified by its embedded “post” tag, tends to emphasize the temporal trajectory, focusing largely on the historical connection between nation-states due to colonialism. The diasporic trajectory, on the other hand, accounts for the spatial fissures that constitute the nation, allowing for problematizations of hegemonic narratives from the displaced cultural, temporal, as well as spatial perspectives and concerns of dispersed communities. The concept of diaspora thus specifically invokes issues of immigration, the consequences for national identity of such migrations, and the emergence of new identifications and alliances as a result of these cultural, temporal, and spatial reconfigurations. It thus draws attention to particular kinds of hegemonies and oppressions that continue to be in play in the postcolonial nation-state.

Defining Contexts

While diasporic communities have adjusted their histories to the social and cultural conditions in which they have been displaced, they are faced with the burden of knowing that their efforts to negotiate past and present identities and their commitment to their present homeland have been overlooked by the state. This continued lack of understanding of their yearnings and aspirations, even mistrust of their national allegiance, both by the state and the mainstream or dominant community, together with their feelings of vulnerability and growing sense of marginalization in society have impacted heavily on discourses and imaginings of identity and nation. Indeed, “difference”, “national identity”, and “multiculturalism” have become highly contested terms in contemporary postcolonial debates.

Although these debates have brought to the fore the urgency of the themes of identity change and transformation, the fact remains that state-sponsored narratives of social cohesion such as national identity, national culture, and multiculturalism have either been unwilling or unable to seriously consider the cultural shifts and transitions that have taken place in society. Prevailing policies of multiculturalism and national identity have neglected to address the presence, narratives, and perspectives of diasporic communities. Such policies ultimately serve to exclude these groups from constructions of the national. These exclusions, I argue, exist in society primarily because official articulations of nation and identity are built on old ideas of diaspora which privilege singular histories of race and nation, origins over new locations, roots over routes, sameness over difference, wholeness over fracture.

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It is in the context of these exclusions and the implications of such omissions on cultural and identity politics that the idea of diaspora and its translocations bears a distinct currency. Although it is often used loosely and interchangeably in the fields of postcolonial and cultural studies with other descriptive and interpretive terms – such as “hybridity”, “creolization”, “border”, and “syncretism” – the category of diaspora invokes a distinctive historical and cultural experience that is of significance to imaginings of the nation. However, even in this context, whether as description or self-description, deployed as it is by different sectors in society for different purposes, its sometimes contradictory meanings render it a problematic category.

Used originally to denote the predicament of cultural loss and national alienation of peoples displaced from their historic homelands, the idea of diaspora has gradually taken on new and more positive inflections. These re-theorized notions have played an important role as a trope for an age in which uprooting, dispersal, and re-rooting are the very phenomena which transform the terms in which identity needs to be understood. On a more concrete level, these new conceptualizations of diaspora have charted the transformations in communities that were displaced in the colonial era. Khachig Tölölyan”, in his editorial preface to the founding issue of *Diaspora* (1991), has claimed that diasporic groups “are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment”. Tölölyan argues that the rising assertiveness of ethnic minorities, which view themselves as transnational formations rather than as minority subjects of the nation-state, has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the nation-state’s discourses, concepts, and social practices. Here, Tölölyan points to the construction by diasporic groups, marginalised into exclusion as the paradigmatic others of the nation, of a separate-but-

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equal narrative of identity and belonging that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state.

However, I want to make it clear that this is not the resurgent or interrogative potential in the re-articulated idea of diaspora, be it as lived practice, conceptual or analytical tool, or as cultural politics, which I valorize and wish to foreground here. Even so, it needs stating that the transnational solidarities or commonalities forged by diasporic communities are often a defensive response to their forced assimilation and/or continued economic, cultural, and political exclusion or marginalization within the nation-state. But while the underlying reasons for the “transnational” or “non-national” (even “anti-national”) identities espoused by minority ethnic groups must be acknowledged, what is of value to me are those diasporic communities who, despite their marginalization by the state, consciously define, position, and identify themselves as part of the “national”. For them, it is the nation as imagined community that is the focus of identification, belonging, and cultural membership.

Thus, my aim is not to privilege, in the way Tölölyan does here and other scholars of diaspora theory have elsewhere, the construction of a separate and subversive discourse of identity by diasporic communities, where these minority groups resist erasure by an oppressive state by maintaining identifications outside the national time-space.

Rather, I reiterate that my interest is with the cultural practices and forms of representation of those diasporic groups who profess their political and cultural allegiance and commitment to and who claim belonging and rootedness in their present (albeit oppressive) homeland. While narratives of uprooting, displacement, and difference

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continue to distinguish these groups as a sub-community with their own specific histories within the context of the nation-state, my emphasis on the *national* character of diasporic groups and the cultural politics associated with them, aims to lift diaspora away from the old discourse of loss and cultural *displacement* and to reformulate it as the site of re-rootings and new “placement”. Thus, while still recognizing the experience of dislocation and the actual marginalization of peoples ensuing from that history, such re-articulations of diaspora are also concerned with highlighting the processes of translocation – connectivity, resistance, adaptation – that mark the identity formations and cultural representations of these communities. Diaspora, seen this way, becomes a signifier of dislocation *and* connection. In this formulation, diaspora is a simultaneous sign of complex and contestatory entanglement that unsettles hegemonic notions of a prior or originary national identity.

Such a conceptualization of diaspora as a theoretical framework for this paper, while foregrounding the “translocative” effects associated with this concept, also acquires a critical edge by drawing attention to the attendant political issue of the exclusion and discrimination still faced by such communities in society. It is here that James Clifford’s nuanced re-definition of “diaspora” achieves clarity. Clifford has argued that diaspora should be read as “a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (*Routes*, 252).

My discussion, therefore, will focus on how the claims of belonging, emergent affiliations, and identifications of diasporic groups disrupt the neat coherence and boundedness of hegemonic discourses from *within* the territorial, temporal, and

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geographical boundaries of the nation. In this (re)conceptualization of the translocative impact of diasporic communities, such groups have not only changed themselves by picking up new accentuations in other temporal and spatial locations or settings and by becoming established as distinctively *British* or *American* or *Canadian* or *Malaysian*, but have begun to reconfigure the very meaning of those terms as well.

In the developing nation-state of Malaysia (as in other colonized locales such as Trinidad, Fiji, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, for instance), the descendants of colonial immigrants have created new forms of identification and allegiance that have problematised the very authority and authenticity to which the term “national identity” lays claim. No longer do these second-, third- or fourth- generation heirs of the migrations engendered by colonialism think of themselves as temporary sojourners in their nation. They are a people whose identity is no longer defined by a sense of loss, cultural impoverishment, or the absence of a homeland. Their claims to rights and representation have begun to actively resist the assumptions of hegemonic discourses and the oppressive and/or the assimilationist pressures lurking behind state-sponsored platitudes concerning unity, equality, and togetherness in the discourses of multiculturalism and national identity in these countries.

This leads me to the argument that claims for cultural inclusion and political legitimacy made by diasporic communities must be recognized and addressed by the state if categories such as national identity and multiculturalism are to have any definitive political or ideological value in the twenty-first century. We are already at a historical conjuncture where concepts of the nation have to be re-examined in ways that jettison

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essentialist paradigms to take on board the reality of the constitutive differences and heterogeneities of the nation.

Literary Translocations: K.S. Maniam's New Poetics of Diaspora

There is a growing body of work that has emerged in recent years in Malaysia that contributes to the discourse and vocabulary on diaspora by showing how minority ethnic communities marginalised into national invisibility articulate their presence and claim to inclusion and national identification. In literature, films, painting, music, dance, and other cultural productions, there has been a vibrant proliferation of images, values, and strategies which critique the normative representations of official discourses, giving impetus to dynamic expressions of national-cultural identity.

The works of K.S. Maniam, along with those of other creative practitioners such as Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Pui Nam, Lloyd Fernando, and Lee Kok Liang, provide valuable insights into the processes of identity reconstitution and chart new developments in the idea of Malaysian national identity and belonging from the perspectives of the marginalized diasporic communities they write about. Their themes on diaspora and national transformation lend credence to a discourse whose increasing salience has yet to be fully theorized or conceptualized. This body of writings offers important interrogations of hegemonic narratives of the nation and its associated concepts founded on their authors' experience of as well as ideological stance to the translocative consequences of diaspora. Indeed, in the current Malaysian postcolonial conjuncture, the idea of foregrounding the heterogeneity of national identity as well as protecting the

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rights and interests of diasporic groups in response to exclusivist state policies and ideologies has become an issue of crucial concern.

With specific reference to Maniam, the chronology of his works is revealing of the transitions and transformations that have taken place in Malaysian society over the last few decades. Viewed collectively, his writings, from the early short fiction¹ to his most recent work, the collection of short-stories entitled *Faced Out* (2004), chart the changing nature of the discourses of homeland and identity of the Indian diasporic community of Malaysia from the period of its early domicile in Malaya beginning in the early twentieth century (corresponding to the high point of the colonial policy of indenture) through Independence in 1957 right up to the close of the twentieth century and the brink of the new millennium.

Like him, most of Maniam's characters are descendants of colonial immigrants from India, who borne across, in the words of Edward Said, from "tradition, family and geography" ("Mind of Winter", 50), have to negotiate not only the trauma of this historical disjunction but also the ways in which such a history bears upon their marginalization and exclusion in society. The early short stories, capturing an earlier moment in the historical process of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia, offer insights into the early diasporic experience of exile and anxiety over the loss of cultural continuity and its corollary of nostalgia — that Naipaulian longing for a "pure time" of fulfillment in "the landscapes hymned by [one's] ancestors" (*Mimic Men*, 32). Stories such as "Ratnamuni", "The Third Child", and "Removal in Pasir Panjang" capture the inflections of diasporic Indian life, replete with its fear of failure as its members cling desperately to

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familiar rituals even as these begin to lose their relevance and currency in the new cultural location.

Crucially, Maniam does not represent the Indians as a lost people, condemned to a life of futile mimicry on alien shores. In the later stories such as “The Eagles”, “Plot”, and “Encounters”,² and especially in the novels, there is the suggestion that the power of nostalgia for the ancestral homeland and identification with its traditions have given way to the compulsion to create new narratives of home and belonging, new modes of cultural and national identification commensurate with the larger processes of historical change at work in Malaysia. His writings turn attention away from the semantics of loss, detachment, exile, and alienation associated with the classic discourse of diaspora to issues of hope, connectivity, adaptation, new beginnings.

Through his privileging of a “new diaspora” aesthetics of desire and attachment, Maniam has distanced himself from the cultural politics of nostalgia and detachment that characterized the “old diaspora” (Mishra, 421)³ and its writers such as V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul’s dynamics of cultural identity and identification, anchored in the circumstances of an earlier moment in the narrative of colonization and the historical phase of the Indian diaspora, induces in him deep feelings of loss that stem from his conviction that he will always be something less than the “pure” cultural entity he would have been if he had not been uprooted from his homeland of India. Thus, to Naipaul, the idea of cultural belonging will always be an impossibility because the singular and “authentic” Indian identity that he and his characters yearn for has been forever undermined by the displacements of history. In its place is homelessness and “deep disorder” (*Mimic Men*, 32), the lost unities of diaspora.

At sharp variance with Naipaul's aesthetic dedication to chronicling the ravages of uprooting and dispersal is Maniam, for whom diaspora and the translocative possibilities and effects associated with it are embraced and represented as creative forces with the power to challenge established orders. Consequently, he re-articulates what Naipaul laments as diaspora's "out of placeness" (*Enigma*, 19) into the enabling idiom of a "multiplicity of spaces" and places, at once temporal, cultural, and spatial, ("New Diaspora") to signify the dynamic processes of accommodation, appropriation, and resistance engaged in by diasporic communities across the globe — "people in whose deepest selves", as Rushdie has described, "strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 124-25).

In a country where the fiction of diaspora as fixed identities grounded in discrete homelands is employed to both rationalize and legitimize hegemonic cultural hierarchies and their exclusionary practices, Maniam's writings and cultural politics are indeed fraught with controversy. Indeed, the transformative capacity of diasporic cultures to form a national culture of creative and selective adaptation in ways that resist total assimilation into the dominant culture is an important aspect of the complex social and cultural changes occurring in Malaysia.

Malaysia as New "Diaspora Space"

A quick introduction to Malaysian realities and cultural politics is now imperative. Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation, whose character and composition

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have been shaped by successive colonizations (the Portuguese and Dutch had been there before the British), the presence of various indigenous groups, the migrations of whole peoples from China and India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the co-existence of numerous other minority groups, languages, religions, and traditions. In terms of its population, the numerically and culturally dominant Malays (who are Muslims),⁴ also make up the politically hegemonic community. They constitute about 62% of the total population. Malaysians of Chinese descent, who are perceived as holding considerable economic power, account for about 25% while those of Indian ancestry constitute less than 10% of the population. A great majority of ethnic Indians and Chinese are descendants of those immigrants who were transported out of their homelands by the British in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to service the colonial economy.

While Malaysia prides itself for being a democracy whose constitution affirms the multiethnic character of its people by allowing them to practise their religions and cultures, members of the Malay community are accorded special privileges. Not only their language, but also their religion is granted official or “national” status on the grounds that it is they who constitute the nation’s indigenous community. The Malays’ claim to “rootedness” is mirrored in their constitutional status as *bumiputeras* (Malay, literally, for “princes of the soil”).⁵

Given this scenario, the difficulty of forming a national culture and identity that is inclusive and genuinely respectful of diversity and difference, as well as of creating and maintaining a democratic form of nationalism, has indeed become an issue of complex and increasing urgency. Such a task is compounded by the fact that more than fifty years

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after *Merdeka*, “freedom” from the British colonial rulers, our leaders of state are still holding on to a model of nationalism and national identity whose inception and rise was predicated on an earlier, anti-colonial, historical moment. It is the state’s continued adherence to such an out-dated form of nationalism, which called for the forgetting of difference, that has given rise to the creation and consolidation of hegemonic practices and traditions which are incompatible with the translocated realities of difference and diversity of contemporary Malaysian society.

Not only in his fiction, but also in essays and interviews⁶ as well as other articulations in the public forum, Maniam has spoken of the need to evolve appropriate cultural strategies for the articulation of a more inclusive framework for incorporating difference and managing cultural diversity in the country. Although the Malaysian state has put in place an official policy of multiculturalism, in the form of the National Cultural Policy implemented in 1971, the strategies and practices that such a conservative model of multiculturalism references tacitly calls for the assimilation of difference into the customs and practices of the majority. Multiculturalism in Malaysia, drawing from hegemonic processes of fixing, division, and categorization, has simply become another way of discriminating against those who do not belong to the mainstream community.

It is in relation to this that Maniam has presented a valuable critique of the concept of “pragmatic tolerance” (“New Diaspora”, 5) inherent to the official discourse of Malaysian multiculturalism, where the presence of diasporic cultures is officially recognized as being “tolerated” by the state and/or majority culture. Such a rhetoric is revealing of the play of power in the hegemonic discourse of the nation-state, which prides itself for being magnanimous in having accorded formal political accommodation

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to its ethnic minorities. However, the self-laudatory epithet of “tolerance”, as Maniam suggests, implicitly also makes clear the subordinate status and position of minority groups, for while the state bestows official recognition to its diasporic communities, it does so on its own terms and from within dominant traditions and discourses. My point here is that while the state admits its ethnic minorities into citizenship in the nation, it denies them cultural membership of it. It also functions to keep cultures distinct and separable. As Maniam points out, platitudes about “tolerance” by the Malaysian state are built around “a reluctance to enter into the perspectives offered by other cultures” (“New Diaspora”, 5).

Accordingly, he rejects the hierarchical agenda of “tolerance” and “cultural entrapment” (“New Diaspora”, 5), and its implicit advocacy of notions of cultural boundedness and absolute otherness. Maniam suggests that multiculturalism as promoted by the state is merely the framework for the co-existence of separate, distinctive cultures within the larger and tidy narrative of Malaysian culture. Therefore, for Maniam, the logic of “tolerance” practised by the state and/or majority culture evades a more profound engagement with possibilities for national transformation. More importantly, this ethic of tolerance harbours the nationalist fantasy of the “otherness” of diasporic communities, the notion that these communities have their own separate homelands and therefore do not belong “here”. This type of thinking is what puts in place and justifies principles and practices of exclusion by the nation-state.

Maniam calls for a more *international* conception of Malaysian multiculturalism, one that would accord diasporic groups a recognition of their claims for not merely political but also cultural citizenship of the nation. Such a conceptualization, Maniam

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implies, focuses on the constructive blurring of cultural boundaries, on exchange and *interaction* which will allow for the infusion of cultural categories with new meanings. This shared endeavour is the crucial first step in divesting multiculturalism of its decontextualized as well as ethnicized relations of power, which will provide the basis for the gradual evolution of a hybrid Malaysian *bangsa*.

Maniam's efforts at reconceptualizing Malaysian multiculturalism in the light of the ongoing dynamics of socio-cultural transformation in the country acquire added significance when posed against a context where attempts to promote state-sponsored pluralist perspectives have proved deeply problematic even for the dominant Malay community. One of the chief criticisms made against official Malaysian multiculturalism within this context is that because it draws its principal terms of reference from a fixed notion of "Malay" culture and identity, it is conceptually unable to engage with the shifts, historical inflections, and transformations that have reconstituted that identity (See Zawawi Ibrahim "Anthropologising 'National Culture' in Malaysia"). In much the same way, Maniam's critique of Malaysian multiculturalism is not only that its terms do not correspond to the actual cultural exchanges and dynamic interactions between ethnic groups in society, but that such a static model of culture does not recognize the fluidities within ethnic identities in the first place.

Conscious that official Malaysian multiculturalism incorporates cultural differences within a unitary nationalist narrative, Maniam advances the key dynamic of multiplicity inherent in diasporic cultural politics to dismantle the illusion of homogeneity underpinning dominant constructions of national culture:

We now talk of diasporas, and the double or triple spaces temporal, cultural, spatial they occupy. Multiplicity in thought, memory and space

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seems to define individuals and societies everywhere. It is no longer possible to retain the view that you come from a single-strand dominant culture. The majorities define the minorities as much as the reverse.... ("New Diaspora", 5)

In rejecting linearity and arguing for an ethic of multiplicity in "thought, memory and space", Maniam seeks to problematize the principles of stability and coherence that underpin hegemonic conceptions of culture and identity. The unmooring of cultures from locations traditionally associated with them and their interaction with "other" cultures in new historical moments, transforming themselves in the process as well as the cultures with which they come into contact, as evidenced in the quotation cited above, is a tenet fundamental to Maniam's conceptualization of the "new diaspora".

Nation and Translocation: Malaysia, My Homeland

In this final section of the paper, I would like to briefly sketch the relevance of the issues I have been discussing so far both to my personal circumstances as a Malaysian and to the context of postcolonial and cultural studies in Malaysia. As the third-generation descendant of immigrants who were "blasted out of one history into another" (Mercer, 56) to service the exigencies of the system of indentured labour in the rubber plantations of British Malaya in the late nineteenth-century, I bear the imprint of diaspora in my present interpellation as a "Malaysian-Indian". But unlike my ancestors on this land who would have lived their lives in much the same way as Naipaul's early characters, men and women marooned on alien shores, clinging adamantly to the sacred memory of their homeland and the hope of eventual return, I do not view Malaysia as the site of "familiar

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temporariness" (*Mr Biswas*, 194). Not for me also the dilemma of divided loyalties or the easy pleasure of a surfeit of homes. Malaysia is my place of desire, my one "true" and sacred homeland.

To this end, as someone labelled, identified, constituted, and described by others as an "Indian", at worst, or a "Malaysian-Indian", at best, I see my ethnicity and diasporic history not as a sign of loss or erosion of an "original" culture, but as a signifier of the fractured and variously connected configurations of Malaysian national identity. However, in Malaysia, as in other formerly colonised spaces, where the notion of ethnicity in dominant discourses is still associated with the historicist narrative of "roots" and the old discourse of the homeland, and its implicit patterns of inclusion and exclusion, the cultural and national loyalty of "ethnic" Malaysians to their homeland is still very much suspect. Such a notion of ethnicity, underpinned by traditional understandings of diaspora, is predicated on deference to "origins" and the hegemonic culture of the nation. Reconstituted as the "newly arrived" (*pendatang*) and as outsiders in the hegemonic idiom of the state, "Malaysian-Indians" and "Malaysian-Chinese" are regarded as sojourners, not *real* Malaysians, our ties to Malaysia viewed as somehow insubstantial, our national commitment secondary or peripheral. So many decades after Independence and the formation of our postcolonial nation-state in 1957, the predicament of diasporic communities in Malaysia still recalls that of our embattled forebears, Said's colonial-era "wanderers, nomads, vagrants" whose fate it was to be left "homeless" (402) – trapped between the old empire and the new state. Like our immigrant ancestors, we too have been pushed to occupy that space of homelessness between our present geography and our "genealogy", where we are and where we "come from". Refused the

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right to claim our country of birth and place of implicit cultural and national identification our homeland, we have, in the words of Maniam, become “exiles in [our] own homelands” (“New Diaspora”).

So, if being a “Malaysian-Indian” confirms the narrowest prejudices associated with the legacies of diaspora, race, and nationalism, I have realised the ideological necessity of rejecting such a hyphenated appellation in favour of a wholly “Malaysian” identity, independent of and disengaged from its ethnic marker. In fact, as images from literature and cultural life readily attest, the majority of the generational descendants of immigrants in Malaysia have already begun to speak of their cultural identity in terms of a *Malaysianness*, rather than in terms of an *Indianness* or a *Chineseness*.

But it needs to be emphasized that the rejection of a hyphenated identification is not tantamount to a disavowal of my diasporic community’s valid social and cultural claims. Rather, my aim in doing so is to ask that we stop to consider what is at stake, politically and ideologically, in such invocations, or how visibly such identifications are indexed to positions of power and powerlessness, to forms of inclusion and exclusion, equality and suppression. It is becoming increasingly clear to recent diasporic generations who have forged distinct and unquestionable attachments to their homeland that such hyphenated identifications indeed exist as proof of their disempowerment and minority status, of their perceived otherness and lack of belonging. This perception of their peripheral place in society is opposed to the legitimate status and claims to indigeneity and belonging of the politically dominant community who are never known as “Malaysian-Malay”. The underlying proposition here is that the Malays are intrinsically or *naturally* Malaysian, who therefore do not require a hyphenated designation to mark

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their belonging “here”. In this way, Malayness, not acknowledged as another ethnicity, is constructed as the normative culture, against which the “otherness” of diasporic identity is marked and consolidated.

These epistemological and ideological dynamics perhaps explain why I have been drawn to look at cultural productions from the Indian diaspora. Do these texts speak, at some elemental, indelible level, of the connection that exists between me and the narratives of my past, my cultural history? However, even as I reflect on the *meaning* of my “Indian” cultural history, I am aware that it cannot be an organic, or “real”, one, as the relationship of diasporic communities to their cultural past, as Stuart Hall is quick to remind us, like the child’s relationship to the mother, is always-already “after the break” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 395). Thus, being narrated into becoming *after the break*, diasporic people like me can be viewed as living *en route*, in that space of cultural translocation *between* imaginary and real homelands. And it is perhaps from this in-betweenness, along that spectrum of *différance*, in which, as in Hall’s words, “disjunctures of time, generation, spatialization and dissemination refuse to be neatly aligned” (“The Multicultural Question”, 227), that I, still entangled, have sought to define the meaning of my place in my nation.

NOTES

¹ These early stories were anthologized in *Malaysian Short Stories*, ed. Lloyd Fernando (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1981).

² See K.S. Maniam, *Plot, the Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: AMK Interaksi, 1989).

³ The distinction made by Vijay Mishra between the “old” and the “new” Indian diasporas is useful here. The “old” Indian diaspora, Mishra explains, can be traced back to the early and mid-nineteenth century as part of the British imperial movement of labour to the colonies. On the other hand, the “new” Indian diaspora, he clarifies, is a term used to refer to the mid- to late twentieth-century movements of people

from the Indian subcontinent to “the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World and the former settler colonies”. It is worth noting that the distinction here is both a temporal and ideological one. Mishra describes the “old” Indian diaspora as a “diaspora of exclusivism” since it created “relatively self-contained “little Indias”; in the colonies. He argues that the new Indian diaspora, by contrast, is a “diaspora of the border” because its “overriding characteristic is one of mobility” (422). I argue in this paper that it is the generational descendants of the “old” diaspora along with the immigrants of the “new” diaspora who are problematizing “rooted” or singular histories of race and nation. The ideological dimension is what is important to me.

⁴ In Malaysia, all Malays are constitutionally Muslims, demonstrating the twinning of the categories of ethnicity and religion.

⁵ Although the umbrella term “Bumiputera” encompasses several other ethnic groups, including “indigenous” peoples in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and the Orang Asli in the Peninsular, it is the Malays who make up the majority of this community. The category of “Bumiputera”, however, is a contentious one not only for those (for example, immigrant communities) it excludes from its frame of reference. Even those who are included under its umbrella, such as the Orang Asli (literally, “Original Peoples” in Malay) are not granted the privileges constitutionally accorded to other Bumiputeras.

⁶ See, for instance, Bernard Wilson, “An Interview with K.S. Maniam”, *World Literature Written in English*, 33, 2 & 34, 1 (1993-94), pp. 17-23.

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