

Adrift on the Ocean: A Study of K.S. Maniam's Displaced Characters

By:

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In 1931, the Census Report of Madras stated that the Indian emigrant “takes his own world with him and sets it down in his new surroundings” (qtd in Arasaratnam 65). This remark suggests two levels of migrant experience – at one level, the Indian emigrant deliberately reconstructs ‘home’, wherever he or she is, thus maintaining a psychic connection, and remaining grounded by his or her sense of India as home. At another level, however, this remark serves to underline the potential disconnectedness of the Indian emigrant from his or her current social and cultural environment, resulting in a sense of *not* being at home within the new home. There is a tension between these two levels of existence which, we can infer, can leave the emigrant from India displaced and uncertain.

In this paper, I would like to look at this tension, and a possible resolution to it, in the context of Malaysia. Voyaging from India, across the Indian Ocean, migrants from the subcontinent to Malaya found themselves caught in this bind, suspended between two ‘homes’, at home in neither. This dilemma has not disappeared with the end of colonialism. In a nation that defines individuals in narrow and rigid terms of race and culture, it is in fact difficult to contend with the pull between a constantly reiterated sense of belonging to an original homeland, and a fundamental but subtly unacknowledged sense of having a place within the new homeland. I will analyse two plays by Malaysian playwright K. S. Maniam to show how (in Maniam’s view) such tension and displacement psychically affect a particular group of Indians in Malaysia, and how this sense of displacement can be confronted and, perhaps, resolved.

Ocean crossings have long been seen as signs of deep disjuncture in segments of the Indian culture. Among Hindus, the oceans are referred to as *kala pani*, the black waters, and crossing these waters results in profound loss – of caste status, of family ties, even of the opportunity to be reincarnated (because the individual was physically separated from the holy waters of the Ganges). The desire of the emigrant, then, to hold on to those fragments of the past which they carry with them, represents a deep need not to lose more than is absolutely necessary of their fundamental cultural structure and identity.

In Malaya, this tendency was underscored by colonial policies which worked to maintain the ‘foreignness’ of the immigrant labour force, thus creating an imaginary in which immigrants were in, but not of, the land. The entire social structure reinforced their sense of not wanting to cross, and not having actually crossed the ocean. Physically domiciled in Malaya, they remained spiritually connected to their memories of India. This created a sense of “potential uneasiness as to where home really is” (PuruShotam, 86). This uneasiness is clearly evinced by characters in two plays by Malaysian-Indian playwright K.S. Maniam: *The Cord* and *The Sandpit*.

Maniam’s characters face a dilemma: they yearn to put down roots, but in what soil? Having crossed the *kala pani*, they find India cut off for them. Physically, their roots have been removed from India. And in their new home (which is not quite a home), they find that the land is literally claimed by the indigenous Malays, who style themselves *bumiputra*, or ‘sons of the soil’, a title denied to those of immigrant stock. Malaysians of Indian and Chinese descent are considered to be of immigrant stock, and are unable to establish a primal connection with the land. In that sense, the ocean crossing is never really completed. The question to be considered is, to what extent is the individual still seeking to ground his or her self in the ‘original’ homeland? The connection can never really be lost – but is it allowed to become a debilitating burden? How far across the ocean, has he or she travelled?

In many of his works, Maniam shows a connection to the current homeland to be vital. This connection with land is as much spiritual as it is physical, as much a mindset as it is the legal occupation of an acre or two of soil. Mere physical presence on the land is not enough – what is needed is “the continual and ritualistic immersion into the spirit of the land so as to be reaffirmed” (Maniam, “New Diaspora” 6). Such immersion also requires a renegotiation or reconsideration of the spiritual connection with the old home and traditions.

In his plays *The Cord* and *The Sandpit*, some of his characters (Muniandy in *The Cord*, Santha in *The Sandpit*) show themselves to be still, to a large extent, rooted in India rather than Malaysia. While they have, physically, made the Ocean crossing, spiritually they remain on the other side of the black water. Others, such as Muniandy’s son Ratnam and Santha’s rival Sumathi, are losing that connection with the ‘motherland’, beginning to find the imported and reverently preserved customs and beliefs irrelevant and overly binding on their freedom. Sumathi in particular is more concerned with creating a new space within the new homeland.

What I suggest in this paper is that, in these two plays, Maniam shows the beginning of a progression of thought and attitudes which indicates the need to finally and irrevocably cross the ocean from India to Malaysia, but without at the same time abandoning that background entirely. This will entail a redefinition of what is ‘Indian’. For example, V. Suryanarayan, speaking of the situation among Malaysian Indians in the late twentieth century, contends that: “The younger generation is slowly getting deculturised and immediate steps should be taken to halt these dangerous trends. The only way by which a cultural renaissance can take place in Malaysia is by strengthening relations with India” (47). This response is understandable; in a social structure which defines national culture as being essentially the culture of the majority ethnic group, minority groups react strongly against the potential marginalisation (or even obliteration) of their languages and cultural practices.

However, there is also a need, articulated by Maniam, to look beyond narrow cultural and linguistic borders. Malaysia’s “new diaspora does not seek to be reassured by an imagined cultural stability. It is prepared to adopt and extend the chameleon outlook, that is, live within an ever-widening sense of the world” (“New Diaspora” 11). Clearly, what is needed is not a monocular rejection or re-appropriation of ‘India’, but a conscious melding of India and Malaysia into something new. According to Bernard Wilson, Maniam shows that “it is only when the individual acknowledges his or her ethnic heritage and identity that the potentiality of true *nation* can begin to exist” (Wilson 392). To this end Maniam juxtaposes characters caught, uneasily, within the dilemma of whether to adapt or not. Fearful of losing their connection to home, or uncertain if they belong to this new land, or unconvinced by their relationship with the ancestral home, his characters in *The Cord* and *The Sandpit* struggle to find some sense of place. This can only come with an acknowledgment of the various pulls and influences on the ethnically- and culturally-defined individual so that, in crossing the Indian Ocean, they consciously acknowledge that to some extent, they are no longer quite ‘Indian’ but that, at the same time, ‘India’ is an inextricable part of them. They must, however, also root themselves in the soul of Malaysia, thus becoming more than the crudely essentialised racial/cultural categories which the authorities impose on them.

In *The Cord*, Maniam articulates the need to recover the lost home, while also settling in the new home, through the different generational attitudes of Muniandy and Ratnam, father and son who work on a rubber estate. Muniandy came to Malaya from India, bearing with him signifiers of the culture of the homeland – the *uduku*, a small

drum given to him by his grandfather, meant to function as “a voice larger than [his] own to guide” him in the foreign land (Maniam, *Cord* 44); and the *thundu*, a shawl worn over his shoulder. The latter serves as a symbol not only of his culture and heritage, but his dignity and authority. Malaya-born Ratnam, however, holds on to different symbols – far more materialistic than the mystical, abstract symbols held dear by his father. Ratnam dreams of a Yamaha motorcycle – a machine which encompasses ideas of power, wealth and escape.

Yet both men also show themselves to be connected in their dreams and desires. Ratnam wants to escape from the life on the estate, while Muniandy came to Malaya in order to escape the narrow horizons of Inda (Maniam, *Cord* 89). For both, the dream of escape has left them unanchored, drifting, because neither has managed to reconcile original home and new home, tradition and the modern. Furthermore, neither is able to connect with the other on a more spiritual level, as each despises the other’s dream. Muniandy, however, has some insight into the possibility of reconciling the two.

Muniandy is a seer, and uses the *uduku* to enter into a trance state in which he can see the future. However, on the journey across the ocean, there seems to have been some loss of its mystical status. Muniandy calls it “the hour-glass of the universe”, a receptacle which “contains everything”, but his neighbours only “laugh in ridicule” (*Cord* 46). Functioning in India as a respected prophetic voice, in Malaya the drum’s significance is debased – Muniandy’s fellow labourers want the voice of the drum to guide them to nothing more meaningful than winning lottery numbers. The *thundu* also has changed its function in some way. In India, it “carried dignity”, but “in this country, it has turned into a rag. I use it as a whip, I use it to soak up the sweat on my body. It’s a thing of many uses. I never thought about all of them when I was there” (*Cord* 72).

Muniandy’s cultural heritage, preserved from India, has been unable to survive the journey intact. Meaning becomes debased once divorced from the originary soil. But Muniandy does not discard these symbols. The *thundu* may not symbolise dignity anymore, but it has become useful and valuable in a different way in Malaya. The *uduku* also must begin to speak in a different voice. Having stopped using the drum, he now declares that he will use it again to “find my words, myself” rather than repeating his grandfather’s words; he declares further that “I shall enter the past and so release myself from it” (*Cord* 46). He cannot wholly reject the past, but must use it as a way forward.

But Ratnam’s new symbols appear worthless. Dreaming of his motorcycle, he neglects his responsibilities and allows his wife and children to go hungry. While he scorns his father’s cultural symbols, he has not managed to replace them with anything stable or meaningful or connected to the land. It is possible to read the plight of these two men as arising from their displacement – that is, their distance from the concept of ‘land’. Muniandy has been nostalgic for his homeland, “wonderful to see”, unlike the “hills of gloom; the rivers fouled and the jungles crawling with unpleasantness” which he has found in Malaya (Maniam, *Cord*, 43). Unable to psychically remove himself from the soil of India, he has been unable to build a relationship with the soil of Malaya. Ratnam, seduced by dreams of wealth, makes no attempt to work the land – though here, it might also be profitable to look at the socio-economic power dynamics within the estate world. Ratnam and his fellow labourers are mere workers, with no deeper, spiritual investment in the success of the estate. The estate structure, then, is inimical to the possibility of putting down spiritual roots in the soil – it literally does not belong to Ratnam, so he cannot belong to it.

Muniandy's wife Lakshmi also functions as a symbol of the hostility of the new land towards the importation of the old traditions. Here, she takes on the role frequently assigned to women – that of repository of culture. She is the sacred female body which physically embodies the purity of culture; here, transplanted to foreign soil, she is also vulnerable. Always alone because her husband is at work, she is cut off from the traditional social and familial networks which would have supported and sustained her in India. Her constant refrain is “alone, alone”, and her vulnerability is underscored by the hovering presence of predatory men. The purity of the culture of the homeland, then, is fragile, under constant threat.

She is raped by Muthiah, Muniandy's superior. Ratnam is conceived as a result of this rape, and Lakshmi dies soon after, destroyed by violence and brutality. Ratnam, then, is unable to imbibe anything of culture from his mother; she is, to him, nothing more than a picture. There is no primal connection between them; there are pictures of her all over the house, but Ratnam wants “Life and blood! I'm interested in life and blood!” (*Cord* 31). This is a fundamental problem – the traditions which Muniandy expects his son to treasure, have not come to life in this foreign soil. They have been enshrined, but are distant, lifeless, disconnected, unable to touch Ratnam's spirit.

Maniam does touch on a possible solution to the displacement felt by both Muniandy and Ratnam, with the *uduku*, symbolic of the voice of India, potentially functioning as a kind of two-way bridge across the ocean. As he plays the drum, Muniandy becomes aware that he has so far been speaking in his grandfather's voice; he realises that he needs to “find my words, myself” (Maniam, *Cord* 46). But it is clear that, since he still uses the *uduku*, his voice and words will be informed by India. This link with India is also embodied in the symbol of the cord – Muniandy's shawl (*thundu*), which can be read as the umbilical cord tying Muniandy to his motherland. In the process of leaving the womb of the motherland, the cord has been stretched and twisted, although not cut. It is necessary to take on board these changes, the stretching and twisting, without actually cutting the cord.

Many Malaysian Indians do feel the need to actually make a concerted effort to maintain these cultural links. Arasaratnam declares that “In a country still divided into its distinct cultural traditions, a group that alienates itself from what is its own will have no cultural home” (195). I would argue, however, that the insistence on maintaining “distinct cultural traditions” will result in alienation from each other, and there will then be no culture which speaks of the new home, only a culture which is “preserved” (in the sense of being dead and pickled) and unchanging, an increasingly irrelevant holdover from the original homeland.

Muniandy becomes aware of this to some extent, hence his declaration that he needs to find his own words, although mediated through the voice of his grandfather's drum. Ratnam, however, cannot find similar grounding.

In *The Sandpit*, Maniam's characters move further along the road to finding their own voices and spaces, partaking of both their traditional heritage, and the new homeland in which they live. The play moves towards a vision of a larger, more harmonious hybridity, in which the migrant accepts a multiplicity of influences: according to Maniam, the migrant should “not only aware of his own culture but also of the cultures around him, and of those inherited through his education and reading. He therefore occupies several cultural spaces just as he does several imaginative spaces” (“New Diaspora” 10). Further, Maniam sees “the new diasporic man” in the Malaysian context as actively rejecting the artificial categorisation of individuals into “monocultural, ethnic and political [beings] when multiplicity is [their] true nature”

("New Diaspora" 10). In *The Cord*, Muniandy vaguely apprehends this point, while Ratnam, in rejecting his traditional heritage, remains rootless and shallow. In *The Sandpit*, the two protagonists, Santha and Sumathi, come to a remarkable point of fusion which is liberating and empowering.

Where *The Cord* uses the drum and the shawl to symbolise the connection with India and the original culture, *The Sandpit* puts greater emphasis on the mental and spiritual aspects of the connection by focusing it through the relationship of the two women to their husband, Dass, who has been missing for several days. Dass does not appear physically in the play, but he is nonetheless a powerful character, exerting considerable influence over both women. He is a vivid symbol of the traditional, patriarchal society which could, potentially, choke the life out of both women.

Santha, bound by tradition, is respectful of Dass and mindful of her 'place'. Even though Dass is not in the house, Santha maintains her 'place', sitting on the floor by his chair. Her confinement within the borders of culture is represented by her garb – she wears a sari, tied tightly, with a "wide and stiff" border (Maniam, *Sandpit* 183). Interestingly, however, she does not follow these traditions blindly. Where Muniandy's wife Lakshmi, also a follower of tradition, appears fragile and vulnerable, Santha is more self-assured and tough-minded. She appears to have inner resources of her own so that, although she is as alone as Lakshmi, she is neither vulnerable nor folorn.

Santha represents the questioning insider who, by questioning, can bring about collapse or change: "it is a case of tradition examining itself for its continued validity and where weaknesses are discovered, these flaws are removed or kept to the minimum" (Maniam, "Preface" xiv). This, then, is not the 'preserved' tradition which is used to categorise most Malaysians. Rather, it is a vital, growing tradition which adapts to its environment and to current needs. Thus, it eventually empowers Santha.

In her marriage to Dass, she declares that "everything was done correctly" (Maniam, *Sandpit* 185), all the ceremonies carried out properly. The end result, however is that "Now there's nothing to show for the marriage" (Maniam, *Sandpit* 185). Rather than collapsing beneath the weight of the revelation that preserved tradition alone cannot sustain her, Santha examines their life together in a tough, clear-minded way. Ultimately, she rejects the centrality of Dass to her life. For most of the play, she treats his chair as if he were still in it. Towards the end, however, she sits in it with no sign of fear or trepidation. She is able to break the hold it has on her.

Interestingly, however, she sits in the chair only to show that she is not like Sumathi, Dass's second wife. Sumathi violates all the borders put in place by culture and tradition. Unlike the primly tied and tucked Santha, Sumathi wears a tight T-shirt and a loose, flowing skirt; her movements also have an ease and expansiveness not visible in Santha. She is unhampered by Santha's adherence to tradition, and does not treat Dass's chair with reverence. When Santha sits in the chair, it is to scornfully imitate Sumathi's lax, slutty behaviour; she imitates it, finds it wanting, and rejects it.

Sumathi is the brash interloper into Santha's ordered, bounded life. It is implied that Dass has rescued her from a life of prostitution. We are told that she was punished by her family for exhibiting a too-open physicality and sensuality, and as a result ran away from their stifling propriety and rigid adherence to rules of conduct and morality. Santha disapproves of the very tactile, physical nature of the relationship between Sumathi and Dass. Nothing about their relationship and marriage was "done correctly". And yet, both women find themselves in precisely the same situation – betrayed, somehow, by the traditions that govern their lives, waiting for the return of their missing husband.

Maniam thus presents the two women as extremes along a single pole. Different as they are, they share a deep and vital connection. This differentiates them from Muniandy and Ratnam, who seem to have no connection to each other, and from Lakshmi, who is alone in this new world.

Although Maniam appears to embody two opposing viewpoints within the bodies of Sumathi and Santha, it is not a simple case of presenting them as binary opposites, of pitting tradition against modernity. Neither tradition nor modernity, in opposition, is going to work. Santha's adherence to tradition "insists on correctness and consideration" but also "keeps a person at a distance from another" (Maniam, "Preface" xiv) – it is, then, incomplete; it is found wanting in some way.

Maniam suggests that Sumathi, the younger wife, has an "emergent" tradition ("Preface" xv), one which thrives on closeness rather than distance; unlike Santha, Sumathi seems free to leave the confines of the house, she is less restricted. Yet her freedom, ironically, places its own boundaries around Sumathi. Sumathi, unlike Santha, is not content to sit and wait for Dass to return. She decides to go out and actively search for him; she therefore ends up waiting in a hotel room in a red-light district, sending out for word of him. She remains confined within this room because her relative freedom also means that she is less protected than Santha. Santha's traditional bearing removes her from the public arena. Sumathi, because she puts herself in that public arena, is in danger from predators. If she were to come out of the hotel room, or to lose the protection of Dass's name, she would be preyed upon by the local pimps. Thus, while she values "companionship, caring, playfulness [and...] a sane enjoyment of sensual life" (Maniam, "Preface" xv), unlike the more aloof Santha, it can be said that her emergent tradition has also been found wanting in some way.

Just as with Muniandy and Ratnam, we become aware that neither can function effectively in isolation; to try to do so is to invite failure and loss. In *The Sandpit*, Maniam shows the two women coming together at the end, each tempering the tendencies of the other, so that a new, hybrid tradition emerges from their contact. Sumathi, the vital and physical young woman, sings and dances, rejecting "authority", "uncertainty" and "the unholy" (*Sandpit* 216); in other words, she rejects any external attempt to control her. At the same time, however, her rejection of "the unholy" implies a strong moral centre to her 'looser', less rigid lifestyle. Santha, meanwhile, has up to this point been physically restrained and contained, reflecting her aloofness. Now, however, she begins to dance "in her own controlled and yet in a vital fashion" (Maniam, *Sandpit* 216). Her restraint, then, is tempered by an apprehension of energy and joy. Each woman takes on aspects of the other, because each has examined her monocular view of tradition, and found it wanting. Santha's avid espousal of tradition is shown to be fundamentally meaningless, while Sumathi's utter rejection of it leaves her vulnerable and unprotected. It is only in a melding of both that the women find themselves empowered and liberated from the influence of Dass, emerging into a new, shared space of existence.

Malaysian director Krishen Jit, who directed both *The Cord* and *The Sandpit*, felt that a sense of connection is deeply necessary. Talking about *The Sandpit*, he declares that "life together is livable but life apart is not" (Nge 218). This statement is true on many levels: Maniam has demonstrated that together, Santha and Sumathi are stronger. But the idea of 'together' can also refer, in a more metaphorical way, to the mixing of the old and new traditions, original and new homelands. Life cannot be lived, unless these elements come together meaningfully. The emigrant must cross the

Ocean, but in crossing it, he must learn to bring something of the original homeland with him, and to meld it spiritually with the new homeland.

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