



**DYNAMICS OF DISLOCATION: PORTRAYAL OF THE TAMIL
DIASPORA IN MALAYSIA IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES FROM
THE ANTHOLOGY *HAUNTING THE TIGER: CONTEMPORARY
STORIES FROM MALAYSIA* BY K.S MANIAM**

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Abstract: The term diaspora, which comes from the Greek word for scattering or dispersal, primarily refers to a group of people who no longer reside in their country of origin. Politics, natural disaster, globalization and transnationalism could be some of the possible reasons of their wide dispersal. Diasporic communities are often bound together by a common ethno-linguistic and/or religious identity. The dynamics of dislocation includes trauma, ruptured identity, cultural bifurcation and altercation with the Hostland. In a world where identities are increasingly defined with reference to dominant powers, marginalization becomes central with regards to diasporic communities. In this hegemonic paradigm, we also see means of resistance undertaken by some of the marginalized communities, who dissent against the dominant powers. This paper examines the angst of dislocation observed in the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia through select short stories from the anthology *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary stories from Malaysia* by K.S Maniam. It further portrays how the diasporic individual is constantly aware of his/her marginality in both the spaces, and hence can neither completely assimilate with the Hostland, nor completely disassociate with the Homeland.

K.S. Maniam is an Indo-Malaysian writer, coming from a working class background. His short stories chosen for study include “Terminal”, “Haunting the Tiger” and “The Eagles” from the anthology called *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary stories from Malaysia*. The paper argues that Maniam not only depicts the marginalization of the diasporic Tamil communities by the Malays, but also shows the resisting diaspora who do not wish to assimilate. Within this diasporic community the stories also illustrate further marginalization based on class and caste. The paper notes different resisting patterns by marginalized communities- through education in some cases, through economic advancement in some others.

Keywords: diaspora, displacement, resistance, marginalized

The term diaspora was derived from the Greek word for scattering or dispersal. It refers to a group of people who no longer reside in their country of origin. Politics, natural disaster, globalization and transnationalism could be some of the possible reasons of their wide dispersal. As a consequence of displacement, the diaspora is predominantly subjected to certain dynamics of dislocation that includes ruptured identity, cultural bifurcation and friction with the hostland. The anthology of short stories *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary stories from Malaysia* by K.S. Maniam explores the diasporic consciousness of the communities of Plantation Tamils in Malaysia. The multicultural Malaysian society faces a constant threat of ethnic violence as it is divided along racial lines, reinforced by religion, language, and occupation. Also, there are instances of internal conflict within the diasporic community of Indo-Malaysian Tamils on the premise of caste and class.

K.S Maniam, born as Subramaniam Krishnan in 1942, is an Indo-Malaysian writer born in Bedong, a small town in Kedah situated in northern part of Malaysia. He is a Hindu Tamil, who belongs to the third generation of Indian migrants who had migrated to Malay Peninsula in around 1916. He was a first-hand witness of the lifestyle of Tamil workers in the rubber plantations because as a child he would accompany his parents to their second job of rubber-tapping in an estate. The dynamics of dislocation that Maniam’s works focus more on

are issues of connectivity and new beginnings, rather than the usual elements of loss, detachment, exile, alienation in diasporic discourse.

His anthology of short stories, entitled *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary stories from Malaysia*, effectively reflects the life of his community in Malaysia. Maniam shows oppression of the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia, by the Malaysians and also depicts further marginalization within the group based on class and caste. Among the migrants, some wanted to assimilate to the host culture but they were unable to, some chose to be marginalized and some resisted by educating themselves or gaining economic advancement.

Maniam's short story "Haunting the Tiger" revolves around the character of Muthu, the descendant of a Tamil expatriate in Malaysia. The other major character, Zulkifli, was a Malaysian who lived near the jungle where Muthu went to hunt. One day in the middle of the forest, Muthu realised some eerie presence which he felt was that of a tiger. After that experience, Muthu was preoccupied with the thought of having encountered a tiger. But he failed to encounter one and his anger brought him to Zulkifli. Muthu and Zulkifli, like spiritual seekers ventured out in search of a tiger to the interiors of the jungle; at one point they could not carry their weapons anymore. Muthu wanted to shoot the tiger, but Zulkifli tells him that the tiger he was going to show him cannot be shot and nobody can possess it. When they go deeper, Zulkifli tells Muthu that the tiger can smell something foreign which was the reason they could not spot one yet. The smell was that of the mind and body. Muthu thought like a chameleon, he did not internalise the spirit of the tiger but wanted to possess it. Therefore, he could never encounter a tiger.

Here one can perceive it as, assimilation even if desired, is not always possible for the diaspora. Muthu can be seen as a representative the Tamil diasporic community in Malaysia. Muthu wanted to hunt the tiger, but in return he is haunted by the image of the tiger and wants to possess it. Zulkifli and Muthu symbolically represent the bumiputra and non-bumiputra respectively. The term bumiputra literally means "son of soil" or "son of land" therefore refers to the indigenous people of Malaysia. The Malayan tiger is the national animal of Malaysia. In this context, K.S Maniam in his essay "Writing from the Fringe of a Multi-Cultural Society" opines that the tiger is a perceived symbol of nationhood and sense of belonging; but it can also be seen as a daunting rhetorical device to those who unquestionably surrender to its powers. Therefore, this short story becomes allegorical. Muthu's preoccupation of having encountered a tiger can be seen as his utmost urge to

assimilate. But as a diaspora, it becomes impossible for him. Another way of analysing the text symbolically is, Zulkifli mirrors the self-confidence and empowerment of the tiger. While Muthu, though confident is not as authoritative as Zulkifli, whom he relates to his controlling father. Muthu identifies himself with the chameleon with an approach to covers a wider spectrum of man's memories, struggles and achievements that transcend self-dreamed and nationally-envisioned boundaries. But the chameleon is a minor insignificant creature as opposed to the tiger. Through the metaphor of the chameleon Maniam is also critical of the diasporic communities of Malaysia as they change their colours according to the situation. They are closed communities who in a way consciously marginalize themselves. (Maniam, *In Diaspora* 279-287)

The short story "The Eagles" narrates the experiences of Ganesan who wishes to climb up the social ladder through education, but continues to get marginalized because of his caste and class. Ganesan's father was a dhobi or a launderer, but he knew the importance of education; hence his son Ganesan had received education. After the death of his father, Ganesan was bound to take over his job. His step-mother asked him to go to an upper caste and upper class house to pick clothes. The whole family misbehaved with him and treated him with animosity. "Ganesan caught the hostile glances of the couple, the sadistic curiosity of the children". (52-53) Ganesan once told them that he went to school and also teaches his brothers and sisters. Initially they did not acknowledge it, for them he was only a dhobi but later Ganesan became Raman and Devi's teacher.

At the very outset we come to know about the caste hierarchy and class privilege of the house when Ganesan describes the eagle-rearing gate posts and the five Alsatian dogs. Ganesan is constantly marginalized by the orthodox family. The elderly lady of the house, who can be seen as the embodiment of casteism, forbids him to enter the house. He is not allowed inside the house, because conventionally the lower caste people are prohibited from entering certain spaces as their touch is seen as polluting. Following the elders of the house, the children— Raman and Devi also learn the process of marginalizing him, and they mock at him. Ganesan was compelled to eat the leftovers, and he also had to wash his hand in icy cold water before touching anything, as the hegemonic social structure considers the touch of a dhobi as impure.

Education, which paves way to empowerment, is another tool of resistance which we discern in the story "The Eagles". Ganesan, to the surprise of the upper class Tamil family,

was educated and his education empowered him despite his marginalization. In him, one can see the urge to defy authority and tradition, and to be independent. When he becomes Raman and Devi's teacher, he subverted the conventional system of education according to which only the upper caste was allowed to have access to knowledge and education. There is a reversal of power structure through education. Maniam uses the metaphor of the bird eagle, which is a predatory bird, to describe the position of the educated Tamils in Malaysia, who had the ability to resist the marginalization faced by their community.

The discord between the Malaysians and Tamils is evident in the short story "Terminal". The short story depicts the tenuous relationship between the unnamed narrator, who is a Tamil in origin and Kok Seng, who is a Malaysian. Kok Seng had sent for the narrator and after initial hesitation, he later went to the city to meet him. After going there and the treatment he received, the narrator realised that his suburban house was a better space. Therefore, in the end he rejected the city life and returned to his insular community where he felt a sense of belonging.

In this story we see that diasporic communities are often marginalized by the hostland communities. Inevitably the binary of "Self Vs Other", as observed by Postcolonial theorists is established between the hostland communities and the diaspora respectively. During one episode, the narrator was assaulted physically in a crowd. In an oppressive structure, the body of the marginalized is often targeted. The wounded body speaks the language of oppression. The reason behind the assault can be seen as the apprehensions of the hostland communities who see the refugees as a threat to their jobs. The pain inflicted on him left a thought on his mind which did not let him sleep: "The feel of the silver cane still lingered in my flesh. I hadn't seen the face of the man, only the thrust of the arm and the flash of the cane. Was Kok Seng right? I wondered. And if it was intentional, why was I chosen? Did I, in some way, look different from the city dwellers?" (6) In some cases the physical difference, which is evident due to the difference of ethnicities, becomes a major threat for the marginalized. His appearance becomes the obvious answer to his question of why he alone was targeted. And to further extend it, the racial prejudice of the Malaysians that Indians were impinging their jobs could also be an underlying reason for the display of hatred. Though the narrator fails to see the various nuances of the attack and sees it as an accident, it was his Malaysian friend Kok Seng who pointed out to him that it was not an accident but calculated and deliberate. Therefore, Kok Seng can be seen as someone who is aware of the marginalization practiced

by his community, but he does not take part in it. Moreover, he is also critical of this attitude of the Malaysians which makes him a critical insider.

Though the narrator initially seems to have assimilated, the incident leaves a lasting impression on him. He had conflicting thoughts about the city life. He was traumatized; nightmares haunted him and reaffirmed his sense of marginalization. Instead of resisting the marginalization, he acknowledges his minority status. By the end of the story, he alienates himself and returns to his own space, the suburban house which was geographically and metaphorically in the periphery. This act empowers him; therefore his alienation can also be seen as an act of resistance. After returning to his suburban house, he started working on vegetable plots. Gardening becomes an important symbol in diaspora, where we can draw a parallel between the diasporic communities trying to adapt in the new land and the seedlings trying to grow with roots firmly gripped in the land. When the Tamils were transplanted from India to Malaysia as plantation labourers, they were deeply rooted in their culture and therefore they were unable to assimilate to the host culture. Though the narrator is not a first generation migrant, through him we see the inability of assimilation that still prevailed. The diasporic consciousness of Maniam is also evident in the title of the story as the word terminal refers to a place where passengers end their journey. In the story, the narrator's journey end back to where he started, and it ends with a deeper realisation of his diasporic status.

The short stories show that in multicultural Malaysia the centre-periphery paradigm not only exists in the binary between the hostland and the homeland, but also shows the resisting diaspora who do not wish to assimilate and illustrate further marginalization based on class and caste. The different resisting patterns adopted by the marginalized communities are mainly through education or through economic advancement. Jasbir Jain in his book *The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives* opines that the short stories "The Eagles" and "Haunting the Tiger" are significant representative of Maniam's experience, understanding and insight. His narrative strategy is constantly moving beyond the visible to the landscape to capture the amalgamation between the mind and the environs and works and wilderness. He further comments that, "Maniam's rooting in Malaysian culture is equally visible through Ganesan and Muthu as in his other stories such as the 'Terminal'" (Jain, *The Diaspora Writes Home* 167-170).

Maniam is a third generation diaspora who is critical of his own community. Mostly, in the second and subsequent generations within diaspora, their connection with the homeland is through the first generation. Therefore their pull of the hostland is stronger than the home culture. In the anthology *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary stories from Malaysia*, one can see that he is critical of the orthodox Tamils who have carried their superstitious beliefs and religious practices to Malaysia, and hence marginalized themselves by forging an insular diasporic community. Moreover, he is also critical of the diaspora who have come only for material purpose of economic advancement but do not wish to assimilate to the host culture. He is also critical of the Malaysians who marginalize the expatriates as they see them as a threat to their job opportunities and resources. He aptly becomes the exilic intellectual who sees himself as both critical insider and critical outsider.

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