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Signs Of Belongingness and Nostalgia in K.S.Maniam's *The Return*

Abstract

After the inception of postcolonial studies, the issue of migration and dislocation, place and displacement remain a major paradigm of postcolonial concern and critique. The history of migration, displacement and relocation has made the process of cultural translocation, a complex form of significance. Malaysia is a land of multicultural and multi-ethnic society in which the national and ethnic identities are very critical and widely disputed issues. Immigrants in Malaysia, have a sense of displacement and identity crisis. Their identities are no more based on their own culture but become hybrid. Their displacement creates a sense of in-betweenness in search of self. K.S. Maniam, one of the greatest writers in of Malaysia, has widely addressed the issues in his literary productions. This paper intends to examine the dilemma, dislocation, nostalgia and the crisis of identity formation of the immigrant Indian community in Bedong, Malaysia. Maniam's autobiographical novel, *The Return*, is about a South Indian family that is displaced in an alien land, British Malaya. The protagonist, young Ravi, the third generation immigrant to Malaysia, suffers for his belonging. He finds himself in state of in-between space and his trishanku experience of being neither in India nor in Malaysia which is at the very centre of diasporic trauma. His

memory of the first and the second generation immigrants drags his identity formation into a critical phase. My purpose is to examine their struggle for assimilation and adaptation to the new land and new identity. It also explores the protagonist's identity conflicts and his endeavor to escape from his Indian culture and how the protagonist's English education helps him to construct his identity and how his identity formation overcomes his Indian belongingness.

Keywords: Displacement, Sense of Belongingness, Memory, Multiculturalism, Identity Formation.

The issue of establishing belongingness to a certain place is a psychological condition which is mainly caused by displacement. When a person is displaced into a new place or condition, he or she will try to establish a sense of belonging to the new place. Establishing belongingness is very psychological in nature. People who are burdened with this problem are people who have been colonized and displaced either voluntarily or forced by the colonizers at that time. In the name of civilization and the quest for power, the European masters especially the British uprooted many natives from their motherland to work in their new colonies. This process of migration creates a sense of belonging towards both birthplace and new homeland. As such, one might lose the sense of belonging during assimilation process to both ancestral homeland and adopted land. Having said that, Bhugra & Becke assert that migration is thus accountable for losses that go beyond the loss of one's birthplace, namely "the loss of one's social structure and culture" (19) as well as the "loss of the familiar, including language, especially colloquial and dialect, attitudes, values, social structures and support networks" (19). Owing to the onslaught of these radical alterations, the gradual extinguishing of cultural identity becomes a risk for the immigrant. Subsequently, the immigrant also ends up at a crossroads in which a constant dilemma of fully embracing the

ways of an adopted homeland at the expense of discarding those unique to the birthplace or land of origin persists.

K.S. Maniam's first novel *The Return* can be misread as a text that disregards the social reality of Malaysia as a multicultural nation. As the writer-critic Shirley Lim states, "An unknowledgeable reader may well believe Malaysia to be even if pluralistic, an Indian-dominant nation, or at least not Malay dominated country" (132). *The Return* is a vivid portrayal of life in colonial Malay that depicts the major ethno-cultural communities, such as the Indians, Chinese and Malays. All communities practice their religion and culture separately. The lack of interaction between the communities creates a strong sense of isolation, which consequently colours the development of their identities. Such is the reality represented in the novel. As Peter Wicks observes, "Communalism, the situation where an individual's ultimate loyalty and affection is given to his or her ethnic group, permeates the Tamil family at the heart of *The Return*" (30).

Maniam's novel centers on a young, impressionable Malaysian Indian who comes back from further education in Britain to confront the dual realities of the Malaysian landscape and his extended Indian family. It turns out that these two realities are barely compatible. It is because the principal characters make a futile attempt, for over half a century, to put down South Indian roots in Malaysian soil. Indeed, the early chapters constitute a hymn to Tamil ethnicity. Maniam's evocation of a Tamil family's distant but glamorous past, on a sub-continent the narrator had never then seen, provides dramatic, ironic contrast to the grim conditions where Malaysia's Tamils actually lived on the rubber estates near Bedong in Kedah. As at least one other critic has pointed out, the text is so replete with Indian symbols and characters that readers could be forgiven for inferring that British Malaya of the 1950s was mostly an Indian preserve. There are some scattered references to Chinese shopkeepers, but really none of consequence to the Malays who then made up half of the

population of the peninsula. Instead, as Margaret Yong observes, the work “vibrates with the emotional associations of a subject intimately understood” (6). Maniam shows how Hindu deities like Siva and Saraswathi, and Hindu festivals like Ponggal, Thaipusam and Deepavali, help transform and transcend remote plantation existence for an occasional day at a time. They also serve to bring together the South Indian population and help assert its identity as an ethnic minority.

According to R.J Vallerand, the need for relatedness that “involves feeling connected or feeling that one belongs in a social milieu” (300). In order to feel connected, the immigrants usually live together. These immigrants prefer to live together so that they can celebrate their rituals and remain connected to their own culture. The freedom to group with their own people and practicing their rituals builds a feeling of gratitude towards the new land. They feel very much at home and a strong bond of belongingness begins to sprout. In *The Return*, the immigrant Indians live together as well. The people in the hospital line are all Indians too where Ravi’s father runs a laundry business. The immigrants celebrate religious functions in groups. Deepavali cooking is done together by all the women. Goats are slaughtered and the womenfolk cook them while the unmarried girls are assigned to make “thosais on the flat ‘stone’ and families gobbled them throughout the night” (Maniam 13). These immigrants live in groups and celebrate festivals to establish a sense of belonging to the new land.

These festivals, together with Thaipusam and Ponggal, created a special country for us. We were inhabitants of an invisible landscape tenuously brought into prominence by the lights, mango leaves strung out over the doorways... painting of bull horns the day after Ponggal and the many taboos that covered our lives. (Maniam 13)

Besides that, they are also tied down with the same social law which they brought along from India. The lower caste people are not allowed to mix with the upper caste Indians in that area.

The caste system is not eradicated in the new home and they continue to abide this social law. Ravi who goes to English school is often bullied by Menon, an upper caste man who thinks that the lower caste people should not be studying English.

I heard you speak the white man's tongue better than my son," he said. I stood, as had been dictated by the social laws of the hospital community, waiting for him to dismiss me. "You're only good for washing other peoples' dirty clothes," he said and walked on to his house. (Maniam 41)

Since they live among their own people, they practice and maintain the same social structure that exists in India. This environment that they create makes them feel at home without themselves realizing it.

There is no more sympathetic or substantive symbolization of an Indian past than Ravi's grandmother, the woman who is known as Periathai, or Big Mother. She acts as the peddler who has walked with firm purpose and a hump in her back. It is so symbolic of endurance that eventually it osmoses into a terminal tumor. For the youthful Ravi, the narrator based roughly on Maniam himself, the determined, self-reliant Periathai takes on mythical proportions. The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of narrative as "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (xiii). Periathai migrates to Malaya with her three sons establishes a home in Bedong, Kedah. Maniam has portrayed this image with vivid description. As he says:

She came, as the stories and anecdotes about her say, suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow. And like that animal which survives the most barren of lands, she brooded, humped over her tin trunks, mats..., at the junction of the main road and the laterite trail. (Maniam 1)

She cleared a bit of land near the path to the Hindu cemetery and made her first shelter.

However, later Periathai is able to build her own home with elaborate sculptures carved on her four wooden pillars. The sculptures are various episodes from Ramayana where “some of the Ramayana episodes stood out with palpable poignancy” (Maniam 4). Periathai also practices her religion and also follows all the rituals strictly. The immigrant Indians practice the customs and rituals more extensively compared to the Indians in India. Periathai conducts the rituals to remain connected to the motherland, India , but at the same time establishes a sense of belongingness to the new land:

Periathai opened one of the two tin trunks she had brought India. Handling every object gently, she took out a statue of Nataraja ... Perhaps Nataraja spoke to her of the original spirit, and her personal articles of the home she had left behind. It was a re-immersion, a recreating of the thick spiritual and domestic air she must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India (Maniam 5-6).

She brings along many things with the statue of Nataraja like “a copper tray, a hand woven silver-and-gold sari, bangles and a *thali*” (Maniam 5) and wants to create the same feeling of being in India. Therefore she practices the rituals in a very extensive manner in order to feel at home in the new place. Besides that their lives are filled with myths and superstitions which follow them from their motherland. Practicing all these rituals freely and the conducive situation makes them feel very much at home. This helps them build the sense of belonging to Malaya. The narrator, Ravi quotes that “tensions between good and evil shimmered therefore like an inevitable consciousness within our heads” (Maniam 14). Even as children they are influenced by all the beliefs of their society. Besides that, Periathai is also called to cast away evil spells on children. She would attend to children in remote rubber estates to help the victim of evil forces.

The handful of chillies, dirt, salt and leaves my grandmother had thrown into the kitchen fire crackled furiously, a sign that the possessing spirit had to flee unceremoniously! (Maniam 3)

When Periathai dies, the rituals are conducted extensively. Kannan, her eldest son, decided to keep her body for three days. Her death is celebrated like a festival. Kannan refuses to follow the priest's advise to follow the customs and he "took out a wad of notes and distributed them among the chief drummer, sexton, the priest" (137). Though the priest prohibits meat, Kannan spends extravagantly on feasting the people of Bedong. The band is called to play solemn western music for three days. The procession lasts two hours through the town till she is brought to the pyre (138). The displaced people like to overdo their rituals as compared to their mother country. By doing this they feel at home in the new place. The characters in this novel too overdo their rituals and religious functions in Malaya compared to the same group of people in India. Since there is no need to adapt to any new situation in Malaya, these immigrants feel very much at home.

The narrative action is seen through the eyes of Ravi. Malaysian-born, he straddles the interstices between traditional Indian cultural religious values and colonial British influences. He attempts to create a sense of spatial belonging and fulfill a need for connection and identity. Though Ravi is the central protagonist in the narrative, powerful images of the dislocations of his grandmother and particularly his father, Kannan, dominate the textual landscape and foreground the psychological complexities faced by displaced individuals trying to justify existence in surroundings that are concurrently familiar and alien.

Ravi, the protagonist is completely different from Periathai and Kanan. While Periathai and Kanan have a sense of Indian belongingness, Ravi has western and English. The main difference is the "home" that Kannan and Periathai left behind, It is one to which they never physically return, and which they always long for. The identity they seek to establish in

Malaysia is very much rooted in Indian and Hindu tradition. In contrast, Ravi's "home" which he leaves behind and later returns to is that of his family and the fragmented Indian community in Bedong. Therefore, he does not have a nostalgic view of his home. The identity that Ravi seeks to establish for himself, is explicitly not rooted in Indian, Hindu or Malay, but is distinctly western, English and individualistic. Ravi, being a member of immigrant Indian family, has no experience about his home land, India. According to Tang So Ping, Ravi is "more of a failure than Naina or Periathai" (85). Whereas Naina and Periathai have at least the Indian sensibility to nurture an intense response to the new land, a passionate desire to belong, Ravi only approaches life with half a commitment with his English education. He has never experienced life in India. When he experiences Indian culture and rituals he feels alien to his family. He rightly says,

How can one describe a land that lived in but never saw? It was more tangible than the concrete one we flittered through every day. Darkness gave it its true dimension. Then it vibrated within our hearts. (Maniam 14)

Ravi, a third generation immigrant to Malaysia, negotiates his identity through his English education and western civilization. His education differentiates him from his Indian belonging and also from his family and community. He feels at home in western culture and tradition. Therefore he separates his own room from his house and decorates it according to his will. In this novel, two different cultures and milieu are practiced in a same family. There is ambivalence between old and new culture, representing Periathai and Miss Nancy. Ravi's fascination and attachment to his grandmother is always accompanied by recognition of his difference from her. For instance, in the scene where he describes her prayer and rituals, he considers:

Perhaps Nataraja spoke to her of the original spirit, and her personal articles of the home she had left behind. It was a re-immersion, a recreating of the thick spiritual and

domestic air she must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India.

(Maniam 56)

It is clear that Ravi is unable to understand what exactly this ritual means to his grandmother. He can only speculate about what perhaps she might be thinking and imagines a remote village in India. The mental and spiritual journey she makes is totally opposite to Ravi's. While her grandmother follows the path of Hindu religion and customs, Ravi follows western.

The same Nataraja statue also retains its importance for Naina until the day he dies. It also serves as a material object that symbolizes his and his mother's attachment to Indian and Hindu tradition. At the end of Naina's life and after he has rejected or destroyed everything else which belongs to him, the statue remains and continues to be worshiped. In fact when he sets fire to the house, destroying the family's possessions, the Nataraja statue remains unaffected when everything else is ravaged. This indicates the persistence of religious traditions in his house. Ravi describes the scene by noting:

Most of the clothes, books and pictures were completely burnt. The warped, paint less plate, a cracked mug and some pots were littered where the kitchen had stood. The articles in the shrine-room had fared better. Nataraja only darker, had fallen in his side. (Maniam 171)

After getting English education and being influenced by Miss Nancy, Ravi's sense of belongingness shift from India to Western. He starts to look at himself from a different perspective. He resists Hindu rituals and symbols, such as funeral ceremony and ceremonial prayer to the Nataraja statue. According to him these rituals serve to interpellate people in ways that are "irrational and immature" (Maniam 140). In contrast he believes in "logic and the power" (Maniam 140). Ravi struggles to get his western belongingness. He feels suffocated in his house. So he spends more time in school where no one is there to ask his

belongingness. The only way Ravi knows of turning away from his cultural background is to adopt another one and the most convenient one for him is the culture his schooling provides him. He makes the English Language, its literature and its landscape his own:

... we slipped into this invisible country ... It was terribly exciting, a complete contrast to the world we lived in. I longed for escape from the filthy squabbles of my neighbours, the pettifogging playmates in the hospital compound, and the arrogant, vengeful administrative personnel. Returning from school was re-entering another, primitive time zone. (Manaiam 50)

Symbols of western culture, due to Ravi's educational orientation, greatly appeal to him, thereby undermining the cultural symbols he is born into. The western symbols' and 'articles' also pave the way to individual possession of 'objects of desire' which to the western mind is also seen as objects of necessity. Ravi's original cultural orientation would have him content with sleeping on a mat on the floor, but his adopted culture makes him ask for a bedstead so that his room is complete and comfortable. The pictures he pastes on his walls are not familiar to him yet these 'alien' landscapes have the power to stir him pleasantly and to fill him with zeal. Before his foray into Western education, it is cultural symbols such as the incense lit for every Friday evening 'puja' that fills Ravi with a 'sense of comfort and wonder' (18). However, Ravi's Hindu upbringing 'does not invest the individual with the same legitimacy that the modern west insists on giving him. Hindu culture, in this sense, suppresses the individual which is perhaps why Ravi feels a need to break away. Ravi can never involve himself wholly in family business. He does not share any interests with any other member of his family nor does he think of imparting to them the knowledge he has gained from his western education. In fact, he gets his family to gradually respect his 'self-imposed isolation' 'in the brightest corner'(38) of the room. According to western perspectives, Hindu civilization is blind to the reality of the individual. It is only natural, then

that conflict arises between one's Hindu orientations and western values. Ravi's individual dreams are seen as different from that of his family's, "My desire and theirs had a similar pattern but the ends were different: building through stages, I hoped to hold on to something, they to nothing" (Maniam 71).

In spite of his excellence in English language and culture, Ravi is humiliated by his own community. He always gets reminded that he is a dhobi's son. His peers call him "white monkey". On one occasion he gets beaten severely from Menon, when he crosses the "yellow territory" where the lower caste is not allowed to enter. He does not understand the reason behind it. He feels like an alien in his own community. He always questions this discrimination. Gradually, he gets separated from his own community and belonging. In describing the situation he comments, "I don't know what promises I made myself but a grain of iron must have entered my soul for, from the following day, I turned away from the God who ruled my people" (Maniam 79). After getting a scholarship from Indian High Commission, he makes himself free from all kinds of obstacles. He calls this scholarship as "The victory, my father's and mine over Ayah..." (Maniam 103). He starts living his life in his own way. No one comments or humiliates him anymore. His life becomes full of dignity and respect. He describes his living as, "I learned to live under the peoples' censure and envy" (Maniam 103).

Ravi is reminded of his Indian belongingness through the symbols of Indian rituals and customs performed in his house and community. There are several other instances of his Indian belongingness. When Miss Nancy instructs students to buy toothpaste, Ravi's mother reacts to this by saying that there is "plenty of ash here" (Maniam 32) to brush. This incident creates conflict between Ravi's way of living and his family. His mother regrets her decision to send him to English school by saying, "If you had stayed on in the Tamil school" (Maniam 32). Another incident that recalls his belonging is when Ravi visits a shop to buy toothpaste.

The shopkeeper humiliates Ravi's sense of western culture by saying, "You Indian got strong, white teeth. Ha! Ha! This joke" (Maniam 33)! Other particular rituals detailed in the text that contribute to the "Hinduization" of young Ravi include his initiation ceremony, where his teacher, Murugan's, Sanskrit "covered me with a vibrant sensitivity"(Maniam 8). The funeral and cremation of his beloved grandmother which Ravi recalls as a "dramatic, glamorous event" (Maniam 138). The funeral rite for a younger brother, Kumar, after a fatal traffic accident is described as "incense smoking and camphor burning in a mound"(Maniam 160). His father's dramatic renunciation of this earthly life and self-immolation by fire at the end of the story also remind his belongingness.

Other wonderful characters that evoke India for young Ravi included Murugesu, the primary teacher specially recruited for the Tamil-medium school on Riverside Estate in Bedong. Murugesu, according to the impressionable Ravi, "looked like a god himself, pot-bellied, remote and radiating with warmth" (Maniam 15). On the blackboard, Murugesu would compose "lines of curving, intricate Tamil writing" (Maniam 16), and teach from a Tamil Primer with its wondrous stories of elephants, deer, snakes, mongooses, dogs, and cats. To Ravi, Murugesu turns out to be more seductive magician than teacher, thereby unfolding "an excitingly unexpected and knowable world" (Maniam 17). Finally, there is Pather, the legendary goldsmith so popular with the women of the estate, a spinner of tales who "added gloss to otherwise lacklustre lives" (Maniam 18). However, Ravi does not feel at home in his own culture. He always looks for his freedom and individuality. After getting scholarship, he migrates to England for his teacher training education. The notion of England creates a sense of victory over his family and society. But in England he struggles to create his own identity. So after spending two years he returns to Malaysia, his homeland. Describing his return to Malaysia, Ravi notes, "A different, grim set of scenes accompanied me as I took the night mail from Kuala Lumpur to Bukit Mertajam, after the plane touched down" (Maniam 150).

Not all the characters that evoke India prove to be seductive. Menon, the overseer of the estate, is a cruel, devious, bullying figure who zealously upholds order in the estate work force by reinforcing the rules of caste and class, dismissing Ravi's educational plans as "useless dreams". (19) Indeed, the character of Menon, the *ayah*, demonstrates that caste is more of a burden than blessing for South Indians abroad. However, the most ambivalent influence on Ravi's life comes from his father, Kannan. He is initially portrayed as a frustrated, violent, restricted man, prone to bursts of sullen, drunken rage, but is also ambitious, determined and industrious, with a secret admiration for his son's achievements at school and work. Like Ravi, Kannan is an achiever who challenges and renders impotent the caste imperatives in Bedong. Successful in the laundry business, he attains the name of 'Naina,' an honorific term of respect as the 'Father' amongst the Tamils of Bedong. Eventually, Naina renounces worldly success in the manner of a Hindu *sanyasi*, only to burn himself and his house on borrowed land in a ritual of self-immolation by fire. The price for his family, though, is what V S Naipaul has elsewhere aptly called "the disintegration of our private Hindu world" (44).

The immigrant Indian community not only longs for their home culture but also tries to establish a sense of belongingness to the new land to prove that they are a part of that land. People, who are displaced, depending on the nature of their displacement, react differently when it comes into having sense of belongingness. C. Goodenow suggests that belonging and support may be especially important for academic motivation, engagement, and performance of adolescents coming from ethnic minorities and economically less advantaged families. The Indian immigrants in *The Return* are the minorities in Malaya. The characters in *The Return* are "gentle people guided and ruled by dreams" (Maniam 14). They are poor and are trying to make a better living in the new place. Therefore, these displaced people do not go against the law. They abide the law and remain dormant to establish a sense of belonging in the new

country. Periathai is well known for her steadfast character among the people of Bedong. Kannan who owns two laundry shops is also respected by the people of Bedong. The immigrants are people who give in to the law of the new land where they are a part of. They never become anti – establishment, as they wish to build a sense of belonging with the new land. Periathai, who owns a house on the illegal land, is given notice by the Municipal Council to evacuate the home. But looking at her condition and succumbing to her politeness, they allows her to stay until her last days. Kannan too is a very polite man. When he is asked to leave the house, he too is very polite. “We’ll go away soon, Ayah,” he said. (Maniam 171) These characters are very humble and dormant in establishing a sense of belonging in Malaya. Later, realizing that he cannot own the house legally, Kannan burn himself to death in that house. This is his way of establishing a sense of belongingness to be “part of the water and soil of earth” (Maniam 172).

It can be argued that in Maniam’s *The Return*, the story involves in the Indian’s migration to Malaysia, the juxtaposition of losing Indian spiritual identity and adopting the identity of the new land in the assimilation process. It is an inevitable experience that prevails in Ravi’s family’s life. The main characters of the story, Ravi, Naina and Periathai, are in an in-between space and are torn between their ancestral culture and adopted culture which brings them a sense of dislocation and disposition. As such they fail in building a solid identity since they neither belong to the homeland nor to the adopted land thanks to their failure in getting the ownership right of the land they have lived on. Thus, despite their effort to get along with the adopted land, Maniam’s characters in the story undergo a deep frustration as they suffer from unhomeliness which is both psychical and psychological.

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