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## **THE STRUGGLES OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ESTABLISHING A HOME IN MALAYA IN K.S. MANIAM'S, *IN A FAR COUNTRY* (1993) AND M. KUMAARAN'S, *SEMMANNUM NEELA MALARGALUM* (1971)**

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### **Abstract**

*The coming of British to Malaya and the opening of rubber plantations, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, paved way for many people from India who were looking for a better life. To many Indians especially the Southerners, coming to Malaya was an escapism from the dire poverty that hit India at that time. Little did they know the struggle that they will have to go through in establishing a new home in a foreign land. This paper will probe into the struggles of these immigrants in Malaya during the pre and post independence years. This study will be based on the novels of two popular Indian writers, K.S. Maniam and M. Kumaaran. Maniam's, *In a far Country* (1993) and Kumaaran's, *Semmannum Neela Malargalum* (1971) which is written in Tamil, depict on the painful journey encountered by the immigrants and their descendents. They had to wade through displacement, frustration, poverty, rejection and caste system in order to establish a home in the new land. This paper will discuss the journey of these characters to become part of Malaya and how acquiring of land and education is seen as the only way of establishing a sense of belonging to this new place called home.*

**Keywords:** immigrants, displacement, home, struggles, Malaya, Indians.

### **Introduction**

The Indians, especially from the southern Dravidian states started arriving in big numbers to Malaya after the coming of British and the opening of rubber plantations. However, it is to be noted that Indians were present in the Malay archipelago since the Chola dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Many arrived in Malaya as traders and whereby some even settled in Malaya after marrying the locals (Sadasivan, 2011:135-136). The crown rule or the British Raj started in the Indian sub-continent from 1858 and lasted till 1947. Malaya (including Singapore) was brought under British control gradually between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this period of time, both countries were under the same ruler and the people felt free to leave their motherland looking for a greener pasture in Malaya. Rubber was introduced in Malaya and the opening of rubber plantations in Malaya was in dire need of cheap labour. This prompted the mass movement of Indians to Malaya which

happened from the year 1844 to 1941. Many of them were employed under the indentured labour system. When this system was abolished in 1910, they were brought in through the *Kangany* system (Manickam, 2009:63). According to Sandhu, about 9.1 % Indians were brought in as indentured labourers while another 43.7% came under the *Kangany* system (Sandhu, 1969:97). Most of them had wanted to return to India once they had earned enough money. By the year 1957, there were about 820 256 Indians in Malaya with the Tamils outnumbering the other ethnic groups from India (Arasaratnam, 1970:48). All these people who stayed back decided to make Malaya their home. Therefore, this study will look at the lives and struggles of these immigrant workers and their descendents in establishing a home in Malaya. It will also show how education and wealth is seen as the only way of establishing a sense of belonging to this new place called home. This discussion will be based on two novels written by two popular

Malaysian Indian novelists, K.S. Maniam and M. Kumaaran.

K.S. Maniam was born in 1942, Bedong, Kedah, is a second generation Malaysian Indian. His grandmother migrated from India to Malaya around 1916. Maniam was raised in a hospital compound, where his father was the hospital 'dhobi' or laundryman, and would accompany his parents to their second job of rubber-tapping in a nearby estate and these experiences made him to be familiar with the lifestyle of the Tamil estate workers. Maniam attended the Tamil medium school in the estate for a year, and then insisted on transferring to the Ibrahim English school at Sungei Petani, a change that was radically to alter the course of his life. After completing English-medium schooling in 1960, he spent a few months as pupil-teacher there, and then left for India, where he was briefly to study medicine. From India, he went to England to study education. It is to be noted that Maniam is a prolific writer with impressive academic background. He served as a lecturer (1980–85) and Associate Professor (1986–97) in the English Department, University of Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur and later turned to writing full time. Most of his short stories have been published in different anthologies of Southeast Asian literature. Since he attended the English medium school, much of his adolescence years were influenced by British and western culture (Thilakarathne 2012). He won the first prize for The Loved Flaw: Stories from Malaysia in The New Straits Times–McDonald short-story contest (1987) and for Haunting the Tiger in Contemporary Stories from Malaysia in The New Straits Times–Shell contest (1990). He was awarded the Raja Rao Award in September 2000 for his outstanding contribution to the literature of the South Asian diaspora. Maniam's, *In a Far Country* (1993) is about Rajan, a middle aged Malaysian Indian who has come out of a remote estate and achieved success in education and business. He is disillusioned and goes through mid-life crisis. He shuts himself up in his favourite room and reminisces his past. This story is filled with myths and history of the natives of the land and the immigrant Indians. Maniam shows all these through a very

distinctive style of writing by using letters, notes, meditations and flash backs. Maniam's novel will be compared with another famous author, M. Kumaaran who writes in the Tamil language. M. Kumaaran or Kumaran Ambu, who is also well known as Malabar Kumar was born on 27<sup>th</sup>. December 1939 in Jasin, Melaka, Malaya, way before Malaya attained its independence. His parents were immigrants who came looking for a greener pasture in Malaya which was then a British colony. In the beginning, his father like many other immigrants worked in the estate but later started operating his own restaurant. Kumaaran finished his primary education in a Tamil school in Jasin and in 1952 he went back to Kerala, India to continue his secondary education in Malayalam language. In Kerala, he started his career as a writer by publishing a magazine titled "*KalaMala*" (1955) in Malayalam which he distributed in the villages. Then, in 1956, published poems titled *Mannin Paadal* or "Songs of the Soil". He returned to Malaya in 1957 and started writing in Tamil language from the year 1960 onwards. Kumaaran is well known for his various short stories that depict the lives of immigrant Indians and their descendents in Malaya. He has written more than 50 short stories, essays and poems and two novels. He became popular among the Malaysian Indians after the publication of his first novel, *Malargalum Mulveyliyum (Flowers and Thorn Fence)*. The novel chosen for this study is *Semmannum Neela Malargalum* (1979) or *Red Soil and Blue Flowers* which was awarded the first prize for a story writing competition organized by the Malaysian Tamil Writer's Association. This novel depicts the life of Kanniappan, a temporary teacher in the Tamil vernacular school in Bukit Tanah Merah Estate in Kajang, Selangor. It is set during the 1970s where the estates were divided and sold to small holders. Kanniappan falls in love with a girl named Neelaveni. However, his intention to make her his life partner did not materialize due to Neelaveni's caste. Neelaveni then marries Chinnasamy and the heartbroken Kanniappan marries Kamala, his cousin. When Kamala dies during childbirth, Kanniappan decides to campaign on behalf of the cooperative to buy over the estate. Kanniappan also

decided to support the government's project in building low cost homes for the estate workers in order to relocate them to the towns. Both authors depict how the immigrants and their descendents had to wade through displacement, frustration, poverty, rejection and caste system in order to establish a home in the new land. This paper will show the journey of these characters to become part of Malaya and how acquiring of land and education is seen as the only way of establishing a sense of belonging to this new place called home.

**The Struggles of Indian Immigrants in Establishing a Home in Malaya in K.S. Maniam's, *In a Far Country* and M. Kumaaran's, *Semmannum Neela Malargalum*.**

The majority of Indians who came to Malaya under the indentured labour system and the *Kangany* system were predominantly Tamil speaking people. Their only goal was to find a better living compared to their poverty stricken motherland. They came with the hope of changing their fate. Maniam in his novel, *In a Far Country*, portrays how Rajan, descendent of an immigrant Indian, the main character, recalls his father's life in Malaya and says the "...only one great adventure in his life-his escape from India to Malaysia" (Maniam, 1991:4). However, they were disappointed when they found out that the life in Malaya is no better than it was in India. Rajan, now a successful real estate agent reminisces his life during his adolescent years in the estate. His parents were both rubber tappers who came to Malaya under the *Kangany* system. His mother, "went to the trees with secret vengeance so that the latex spilled outside the cups. At the end of the month she found she was poorer by about twenty dollars; the next morning she attacked them with even greater ferocity" (Maniam, 1993:41). This reflects the frustration of the woman who came looking for a better life. His father, watching her voices out his frustrations as well:

*"You want to cut up something," my father said, learning about her destructive moods, "cut me up. Yes, I brought you to these trees. Made you their slave. Put the wounds on me."* (Maniam, 1993:41)

The welled up disappointment and frustration for failing to have good life, makes them regret leaving their motherland, India. This immigrant couple represents the many couples that regret their decision in coming to Malaya.

Kumaaran in *Semmannum Neelamalargalum* points out a similar situation through the main character, Kanniappan in the Bukit Tanah Merah estate. The people in the estate face extreme poverty whereby they had to struggle to make their ends meet. Kanniappan who returns home from Pahang, after his termination as a temporary teacher, meets the poverty stricken people of the estate. Without a job, he too decides to look for a job in the estate but he did not know how to break this news to his mother who had always been proud about him being a teacher (Kumaaran, 1971:11). He also recalls his girlfriend Neelaveni who has to go through a difficult life in her aunt's house. Neelaveni has no parents. Her mother died after being bitten by a snake while her father left to India. The frustrated man never returned to Malaya. Maniam too portrays a similar character like Neelaveni's father in his novel, *In a Far Country*. Muniandy who came to Malaya with his wife to work in the plantation loses his wife. His wife for "some mysterious reason the wife withdrew completely into herself and died" (Maniam 1993:19). After her death he volunteered to take charge of the smoke house. This man who lived in the smoke –house became homeless after he lost the job. He made the pavement of the shops as his home but only to be kicked out by the Chinese shopkeepers. Rajan recalls the undignified death of Andy. His body was found beside "the large furnace where the town's rubbish was burned" (Maniam 1993:22). This man too became miserable after the death of his wife but unlike Neelaveni's father who left Malaya out of frustration, Muniandy remained in Malaya and faced the most undignified death.

Maniam also highlights how these Indians who came into Malaya with bursting hope and finally are filled with disappointment. Rajan's father, for example clearly shows his regret for coming to Malaya. He calls himself "a fool for following the stars! Fools sometimes walk into

hope-giving things. Fools sometimes fall into insect-gnawing ravines" (Maniam, 1993:6). Laden with regret, Rajan's father becomes an alcoholic. Rajan has been witnessing these ramblings and regrets of his father from the age of thirteen. The land that was supposed to be the land of milk and honey has failed them. They were trapped under the colonialist's plan and dream of acquisition (Maniam, 1993:41). However, Kumaaran's *Semmannum Neela Malargalum*, shows how these Indians try to build a home in the new place without any regret of coming to Malaya. Their estate is about to be sold and they are going to be stranded without a home. To add more pain to their misery, their estate is being divided to be sold to small holders and they were to be fired. The Indians are hit by this dilemma on how to survive on the land without a job. With no homes of their own, they are lost (Kumaaran 1971:60). The Indians who were well settled in the estates faced this dilemma after the independence. Many foreign companies began to sell off their estates from the 1950s onwards. Many giant estates were subdivided and sold off to smaller consortiums or at times to wealthy individuals. 290 estates covering an area of 231, 850 acres were affected by the subdivisions (Manickam 2009:125) and about 28,363 plantation workers were directly or indirectly displaced (Stenson 1980:206). MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), the sole political party of the Indians managed to buy some subdivided estates through the formation of national Land Finance Cooperative Society (NLFCS). This condition is clearly pictured in Kumaaran's *Semmannum Neela Malargalum*. Kanniappan and Veerappan try their best by convincing the Indian estate workers to contribute to the Cooperative society in order to save the estates and their livelihood (Kumaaran, 1971:64). These two characters represent the many people who struggled to save the only livelihood of the Indians. However, they could not save all the estates. Kanniappan on the other hand decides to work on the land scheme offered by the government in Kuala Itam. Although he had passed his LCE examination and is eligible to enroll into the Teacher Training College to become a permanent teacher, he decides to toil on the

land just like his ancestors. As he digs out the red soil, he recalls how his ancestors would have struggled when the British first brought them to clear the jungles in Malaya. Whereas, Rajan in the novel, *In a Far Country*, decides to acquire education and accumulate wealth. After opening and registering his own company, Apex Co., Rajan felt that he had escaped the fate that befell his father.

It was a whole new world; there was none of the gloom that had hung over the settlement. Everywhere there was light and brightness and movement. The sunlight fell directly on the skin, not through filtering sieve of leaves and creepers as on the settlement. It became clear to me, as the days passed, that I had finally freed myself from the phase in history that had trapped and killed my father and his generation. (Maniam 1993 :66)

People like Rajan, who feel that they are finally free from the estate lives make only a small percent of the Indians. After the estates were subdivided, about 300, 000 Indians were displaced. Some people decided to take part in the land schemes project offered by the government. However, many of them had to move to urban areas and live in the slums.

### Conclusion

At present, the Indians make the third largest ethnic group in Malaysia. Malaysia also has the largest number of Indians compared to any other country in the world, with 1.8 million people. These are the descendents of the Indians who came to Malaya looking for a greener pasture. Both writers represent this generation of people who toiled on this land to make it into a developed nation. The struggles of their ancestors and people as depicted in both the novels still remain in the memory of these two writers. Their novels function as the unrecorded history of their ancestors that is forgotten by the independent Malaysia!

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