
Interrogating National Identity

Ethnicity, Language and History in K.S. Maniam's *The Return*
and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*

DASHINI JEYATHURAI

University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dashini Jeyathurai is from Malaysia and received a B.A. in English from Carleton College in Minnesota. Jeyathurai is a first year student in the Joint Ph.D. for English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine how two Malaysian authors, ethnically Chinese Shirley Geok-lin Lim and ethnically Indian K.S. Maniam, challenge the Malay identity that the government has crafted and presented as the national identity for all Malaysians. In their novels in English *Joss & Gold* (2001) and *The Return* (1981) respectively, Lim and Maniam interrogate this construct through the lenses of ethnicity, history and language. In critiquing the government's troubling construction of a monoethnic and monolingual national identity, Lim and Maniam present both the alienation and the unstable existences of ethnic minorities that are purposely excluded from the national identity by the Malay nationalist culture.

Malaya attained independence from Britain on the 31st of August 1957. "Malaysia" came into existence after the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman convinced Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, three British crown colonies, to join Malaya in a federal union. Singapore would later leave the union on the 9th of August 1965. When the British left Malaya, they transferred political power to the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), a right-wing political party that continues to be a powerful advocate of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). The

organization believes that the Malay ethnic majority are the rightful citizens of Malaysia and deserve to be given special political, economic and educational privileges. Then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, a Malay himself, created this concept as well as the practice of giving special privileges to Malays. He also coined the term *bumiputera* (sons/princes of the soil) to refer to Malays. Both the term and practice came into official use in 1965 and are still in existence today. Two years later, the predominantly Malay government established Malay as the national language of the country. In 1970, the government made Islam the state religion. Today, all Malays are required by law to profess Islam as their faith or lose their status as *bumiputera*¹. By making special allowances for Malays based on their status as *bumiputera* and institutionalizing Malay as the national language and Islam as the state religion, the government constructed a national identity that was Malaysian in name, but Malay in spirit. Both *Joss and Gold* and *The Return* are two decades apart but their relevance to the recent political and social turmoil in Malaysia is undeniable. They speak to a burgeoning dissatisfaction among Malaysian ethnic minorities who have become far less willing to tolerate a government and national identity that denies them the full privileges of their citizenship.

The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia

It is difficult to discuss any form of Malaysian literature in English without first examining how Malaysia's linguistic and literary spaces were shaped by the government's nation-building process after the end of colonization. The years between 1969 and 1972 marked the government's step-by-step implementation of Malay as the national language in multiethnic and multilingual Malaysia. This is evident in Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's pronouncement in 1969: "It is only right that as a developing nation we should want to have a language of our own. If the national language is not introduced our country will be devoid of a unified character and personality – as I could put it, a nation without a soul and without a life."² In 1971, the Constitutional Amendment Act was passed, which made it illegal to question the status of the national language as provided for in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution.³ By passing this act, the government codified the supremacy of one ethnic group, one history and one language above all others.

The government's linguistic policies influenced how literature was and is perceived in Malaysia. Professor Ismail Hussein, who is frequently called the Father of Malay Literature, was one of the foremost voices in the 1960s and 1970s on the role of Malay literature in unifying the nation. In 1973, he said in a speech that Malay had to be the national literature of Malaysia because: Malay can be understood by all the citizens; Malay is the *bahasa bumiputera* (language of the indigenous people); Malay has a long literary tradition, and finally, literatures in Chinese, Tamil [spoken by South Indians], or English are foreign literatures because they are written in non-indigenous languages.⁴ Hussein had no qualms about sharing his particular feelings on literature produced in Chinese and Tamil. He alluded to the themes of exile, uncertainty, loneliness and a lack of belonging in early Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Tamil literature. The word Hussein used to describe literature created in minority mother tongues was "*merbahaya*," which means dangerous. He wrote:

"This literature is 'Aimless Literature' and literature of this character is extremely dangerous to be made the basis for the new national culture which requires the individual to have an unshaken confidence in the future of the nation."⁵

Perhaps Hussein chose to ignore the possibility that it was difficult for ethnic minorities in Malaysia to have an "unshaken confidence" in Malaysia's future when they were being confronted by legislation and state propaganda that undermined and called into question their very position as Malaysians.

Had he been alive today, Hussein would most certainly call Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* and K.S. Maniam's *The Return* "*merbahaya*" because fifty years into Malaysia's independence, Lim and Maniam do not display the confidence in Malaysia's future that Hussein demanded. Ironically, Malaysia's "multicultural promise"⁶ is what is so readily featured in promotional tourism brochures whenever the government launches a campaign to boost tourism. However, it is this very "multicultural promise" that the government is erasing with its construction of a uniformly Malay national identity. With the end of British imperialism in Malaysia in 1957, the predominantly Malay government has systematically replaced one hegemony with another.

Lim and Maniam tease out the nuances of alienation and instability that the ethnic minorities in their novels face; these authors do so by interrogating the government's construction of the national identity through the lenses of ethnicity, history and language, three categories that signify difference in Malaysia. In "Becoming Nations: Nigeria, Malaysia," the author writes:

"... [A]lthough ethnic minorities in Malaysia know that they are legal citizens of the country but are treated as something else, they continue to act in their daily lives as if they do not know, as if it is somehow 'anti-Malay' or 'unpatriotic' to point out that the playing field is tilted against them by virtue of their race."⁷

However, Lim's *Joss and Gold* and Maniam's *The Return* present ethnic minorities that do not pretend to be oblivious to this unjust treatment.

Ethnicity

If the concept of special privileges for Malays is not obvious enough, the official use of the term "non-Malay" and the use of "nons" in the Malaysian-English lexicon to describe anyone who is not ethnically Malay reveal that ethnicity is the key signifier of difference in Malaysia. In this section of the paper, I explore Lim's

and Maniam's examination of ethnicity as a marker of difference in Malaysia.

Lim's *Joss and Gold* is situated for the most part in Malaysia and Singapore, spanning the 1960s to the 1990s. It is told from the perspective of Li An, a young Chinese Malaysian who teaches Anglophone literature at a Malaysian university. The novel chronicles Li An's life as she navigates first singlehood, married life and then single motherhood against the backdrop of a politically shifting Malaysia. The first section of the novel titled "Crossing" centers upon the May 13th riots that erupted in 1969 between Chinese and Malays. Lim does not thrust us immediately into the riots but intricately patches together the rumblings of ethnic unrest in Malaysia. Since the novel is told from the perspective of a Chinese protagonist, we get a glimpse of the mental and emotional anguish that Li An experiences in the face of a government that has created a national identity where only a Malay is an authentic Malaysian. The buds of Lim's interrogation begin to surface somewhat gingerly. They first emerge through one of Li An's best friends, Gina. The Chinese Gina advises her unmarried friends at the beginning of the novel, "Everyone should marry Malay, because that's the future of the country."⁸ To Gina, the only way to succeed in post independence Malaysia is to align one's self with the one ethnicity that the government validates.

Gina's cheeky remark is but the beginning of Lim's portrayal of the Malay political culture's definition of what makes a Malaysian. The reader continues to see the escalation of ethnicity-based politics from Li An's perspective. Her early observations are marked by denial and a desire to envelop herself in obliviousness amidst a Malaysia systematically altered into the land of the Malays:

[Li An] seldom read the new paper; it was too political, and it published daily editorials demanding special rights for Malays. Reading it made her feel she was in danger of attack in an alien country, and she refused to buy it. If enough Malaysians refused to buy the new paper, she hoped, it would simply stop publishing.⁹

Li An's naiveté is laughable, yet it belies an incredulity at the suggestion that only by being a Malay was one a valid Malaysian. Lim juxtaposes Li An's childlike hope that the new paper would simply go away with the ominous feeling that "she was in danger

of attack in an alien country." Indeed, Li An's premonition prefaces the May 13th riots where the Chinese become the targets of an ethnic pogrom. Li An's perception that she is in this other country is mirrored by Lim's own poignant response in a personal interview with me:

The generation that came into maturity after *Merdeka* (Independence) thinking they were going to inherit the Malaysian world and turned around and discovered that they were disenfranchised and these are, of course, the non-Bumis [slang for non-Bumiputeras or non-Malays]. There is immense loss and confusion and sadness. It's such a loss; it's such a pain that you know this country you grew up in and which you deeply, deeply love could be this other country, this other country that it is now.¹⁰

Li An's denial is temporary, especially after the occasional virulent editorial launched against the Chinese in Malaysia becomes a regular feature in the media. This is revealed in Li An's reaction to these bitter verbal assaults when she next comes across a later edition of the same paper. Li An thinks to herself:

It was the usual call for unity against a common enemy. The elections must change nothing, the editorial said, unless it was for the benefit of the real people, the *ra'ayat*. The *ra'ayat* must assert their power in whatever way necessary. Let the enemy be aware of pushing the people too far.¹¹

Her familiarity with this invective and the jadedness of her response are evident in her description of the editorial as "the usual call." Li An's fear of being attacked in an "alien country" is linguistically realized when non-Malays, and Chinese in particular, are referred to as the "common enemy" in the newspaper. The largely Malay government backs this propaganda that draws a clear dichotomy between the "enemy" and the "real people" or "*ra'ayat*" (citizenry). The use of the Malay word "*ra'ayat*" reminds us that there is no ambiguity at all about who the "real people" are. According to the government, the "real people" are Malays. Li An's angry perplexity at the idea that Malays are the only real Malaysians is reflected in the lines, "I'm confused. Are the Chinese not true Malaysians? Is the problem that we are not Malays? Maybe Gina was right after all. Maybe everyone should marry Malay. Then we'll all be one people."¹² As baffled as Li An is, she comes to the understanding that the national identity that the government has constructed is based on excluding non-Malay ethnicities.

The status of the non-Malay, and particularly the Chinese as exile, reveals itself in a conversation between Li An and the staunch Malay nationalist Abdullah after the May 13th riots. Abdullah tells Li An, “I told you the Chinese cannot push us too far. This is our country. If they ask for trouble, they get it.”¹³ Li An then quietly thinks to herself: “She had known, and she hadn’t known. Abdullah, she knew now was telling her his truth. We/ Our country. They/ No country.”¹⁴ Abdullah takes his linguistic cues from the Malay political culture. He claims sole ownership of Malaysia with the phrase “our country.” Although Li An recognizes this to be “his truth” and not the truth, she cannot help but begin to buy into Abdullah’s perspective. Not only is Li An seen as an exile by the nationalist Abdullah, she begins to internalize his perception of her. Li An starts to identify herself as an exiled figure within Malaysia when she connects the words “[t]hey” and “[n]o country” to herself. She begins to speak herself into exile.

Lim portrays how the government’s construction of a national identity that privileges Malays poisons the interactions between different ethnic groups and firmly entrenches the categories as well as the boundaries of ethnicity in Malaysia. When Abdullah discusses interracial marriages in Malaysia with Li An, he cautions

“(t)o be husband and wife must share same religion, same race, same history. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many *adat*, Islam also have *shariat*. All teach good action. Chinese have no *adat*, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money.”¹⁵

Abdullah uses the imperative “must” to forewarn Li An that there is no flexibility in his argument. To Abdullah, the behavior of the Chinese marks them as unclean and lacking in tradition, unlike the Malays who have *shariat* (Islamic jurisprudence) to govern their lives and a rich legacy of *adat* (customs). The ease and speed with which Abdullah reels off this litany of reasons to explain the incompatibility of Chinese and Malays suggests that he did not develop these ideas on his own. He does not carefully deliberate over these thoughts or debate them with Li An. Perhaps he has learned these reasons by rote from governmental propaganda that elevates Malay traditions and customs above that of other ethnic groups. In my conversation

with Lim, she spoke of the undercurrents of sexual tension between Li An and Abdullah. She said

“I tried to intimate, although not too strongly, had Li An been Malay, he might have fallen in love with her. You know that there was a certain affection that was a possibility, but of course it couldn’t be a possibility because someone like Abdullah could never cross the boundaries of ethnicity and language.”¹⁶

Abdullah’s reaction to relationships that cross these boundaries reflect a fear of blurring the lines of ethnicity that delineate for the government, who is Malaysian and who is not. There is no room for ambiguity in Abdullah’s Malaysia. Even a relationship between non-Malays from different ethnic groups is not viable. Early in the novel, Li An is excited by the prospect of her Chinese friend Gina’s romance with the Punjabi Paroo. Li An sees this romance as a means of subversion, as a way of creating ethnically uncategorizable Malaysians. Lim writes:

“[Li An] thought she now could imagine Gina as Paroo’s wife. As teachers, Gina and Paroo would serve as models of a new kind of Malaysian...She would have light-brown children who look both and neither Indian and Chinese, the new Malaysians.”¹⁷

Yet, Li An’s hope for a new Malaysian, untainted by an ethnic label, is dashed when Gina and Paroo decide to take their lives rather than live as an interracial couple in Malaysia. Gina dies while Paroo is briefly hospitalized before settling down to marry a fellow Punjabi. However, it is Li An herself who will produce an uncategorizable child through her extramarital affair with the American Chester, a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia.

Like Lim’s novel, the child comes out of the fateful May Thirteenth Riots. Li An and Chester’s child is conceived during the apogee of violence between Chinese and Malays during the May Thirteenth Riots and marks the moment when Li An is most uncertain about her position as a Chinese Malaysian. In fact, her daughter Su Yin prompts Li An’s exit out of Malaysia. Li An decides to raise the uncategorizable Su Yin in Singapore. With the failure of the Gina-Paroo relationship and Li An’s decision to raise Su Yin as a Singaporean, the potential for these new types of Malaysians is erased. With this pessimistic ending to the novel, Lim illustrates that in a country where the

government builds a national identity upon only one ethnicity, ambiguous ethnic identities are even more unlikely to survive than established ethnic minorities like the Chinese and Indians. Furthermore, Li An's decision to move to Singapore demonstrates how alienation from the government's construction of the national identity can lead to an exodus of ethnic minorities out of Malaysia. In such a scenario, the government's creation of an exclusionary national identity becomes a 'bloodless' form of ethnic cleansing. In our conversation, Lim confirmed the pivotal role ethnicity has in her novel. "I think *Joss and Gold* came out of May 13th."¹⁸ It is no surprise that Lim suggests that her novel was birthed by the most violent ethnic conflict that Malaysia has ever seen, since she places ethnicity at the very core of her novel and directs all activity around it.

In this respect, K.S. Maniam's *The Return* cannot possibly be any further from Lim's *Joss and Gold*. This is because, at first glance, Maniam appears to shy away from the issue of ethnicity in Malaysia. *The Return* follows the tumultuous lives of three generations of Tamil Indians settled in a rubber plantation in the town of Bedong in Malaysia and is told in the first person from the vantage point of the protagonist, Ravi, a member of the youngest generation in the novel. Like Lim's novel, *The Return* is set against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming Malaysia. In "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam: Ethnicity in America and Malaysia, Two Kinds of Invisibility," Tang Soo Ping criticizes Maniam for solely following the lives of this Indian family in Bedong without incorporating the perspectives of other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Tang calls the narrative "inward-looking" and gives the novel the back-handed compliment that despite this one failing, it is "successful on its own terms."¹⁹ Perhaps aware of similar criticisms that were being leveled against him, Maniam responds in his essay "The Malaysian Novelist: Detachment or Spiritual Transcendence:"

The Return, to take the novel which confines itself to a restricted thematic concern, refers the reader to Malaysian problems and conflicts through *omission* rather than *inclusion* [emphasis added].²⁰

Maniam acknowledges that he omits rather than includes in order to "refer the reader to Malaysian problems and conflicts." His omissions are tools through which he illuminates the government's problematic construction of a national identity that

alienates ethnic minorities like Indians. While Lim firmly steers the reader's attention to the isolation and exclusion of the Chinese in her novel, Maniam leaves the reader with the particularly difficult task of uncovering precisely what he excludes in order to reveal the underlying tumult beneath a society that is frequently lauded for its peacefulness.

For any reader who is familiar with the diverse ethnic landscape of Malaysia, *The Return*'s monoethnic cast of characters may appear to be a mistake or an act of insularity. Unlike Lim's *Joss and Gold*, we do not hear from a range of ethnicities. For the most part in *The Return*, we hear from an Indian cast of characters; the only substantial non-Indian character being Ravi's British teacher, Miss Nancy. Occasionally, we get a glimmer of other ethnic groups in Malaysia through a few of Ravi's playmates.

This omission of other ethnic groups is both intentional and striking on Maniam's part for it effectively conveys how alienated the Indian community in this town of Bedong is from the larger Malaysian society, and how unstable their existence is in Malaysia. While Lim draws upon the May 13th riots to portray the alienation of the Chinese community in Malaysia, Maniam presents the Bedong ethnic enclave as a powerful sign of the Indian community's exile within Malaysia. The absence of the physical and ideological conflicts between ethnic groups in *The Return* that are present in Lim's novel reflect a community that is separate unto itself, a part of Malaysia, yet apart from Malaysia. Rather than showing an ethnic minority at odds with Malays like Lim does with Li An and Abdullah, Maniam portrays a community that functions as if it were an independent country within Malaysia:

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, the pilgrimages to Sri Subramanya temple in Sungai Petani on Thaipusam day, the painting of the bull horns the day after Ponggal and the many taboos that covered our daily lives.²¹

Nostalgically looking back on his childhood, Ravi describes how his community celebrated the South Indian-Hindu festivals of Thaipusam and Ponggal. Ravi claims that these festivals carve out a specific space for

the Bedong Indians in Malaysia. There is a need to outline a space for themselves in the face of a government that has pushed out non-Malays in its creation of the national identity. This space is conveyed by Maniam's phrase "a special country for us," which leaves the reader imagining an invisible border around the area of Bedong.

Maniam never tells us that he is presenting an ethnic enclave but we cannot miss it. A corollary of living within an enclave is the building of a society with a very distinct hierarchy of its own. At the top of this social ladder are the characters of Menon and his wife. In fact, these two are rarely called by their names. Instead, they are referred to as "Ayah" and "Amah" throughout the novel. These terms are honorifics that have been conferred upon them because of their caste. These are the hints that Maniam gives to the reader that the Bedong community lives segregated from the rest of the country. The hierarchy within the Bedong community becomes even more evident when Ravi begins attending the same English school as Ayah's son, and Ravi starts to outstrip him in his studies. As the son of the man who washes Ayah's clothes, he should not be outdoing Ayah's child, who is of a higher caste. However, in doing so, Ravi transgresses the caste laws that the Bedong Indian community lives by. Ravi himself understands that there is a hierarchy that must be observed in his "special country" when he receives a chiding from Ayah for his overreaching ways. Ravi recalls, "I stood, as had been dictated by the social laws of the community, waiting for him to dismiss me."²² Ravi's phrasing is particularly significant because he does not say "this community." Ravi uses the article "the" because that particular community is the only community he has known his entire life. To him, the Bedong Indian community is *the* community. Despite being born in Malaysia, he remains somewhat alienated from the rest of Malaysia.

Ravi's transgression prefaces that of his father, Naina, who decides to open a laundry service outside this ethnic enclave of Bedong. Unfortunately, Naina's desire to do well materially in Malaysia and to step out of this enclave is fraught with difficulty. Naina ultimately meets with failure. Upon Ravi's return from completing his teaching degree in England, his brother informs him that their father "has given up everything."²³ Faced with financial insolvency, Naina loses every laundromat that he has. His brother's words

are particularly ironic because when Malaysia achieves independence, Ravi optimistically says, "Possession wasn't exclusive anymore: it was everyone's prerogative."²⁴ Unfortunately, his brother's "everything" powerfully deflates his use of the word "everyon[e]." Success in Malaysia is not for everyone, especially not for the Bedong Indian Naina.

The reader never quite understands why Naina's business fails. Since our eye into this world, Ravi, is abroad during this period, we gain little insight into the reasons behind Naina's failure. Once again, we come to an omission on Maniam's part. What we do know is that Naina fails once he leaves the enclave. Even Ayah, who disapproves of Naina's decision, like a benevolent liege, offers to give him a position laundering clothes at the hospital that Ayah runs when he sees Naina's business failure and mental degeneration. Ayah says to Ravi, "You're an educated young man. Advise your father. I'm ready to give him back his job."²⁵ Implicit in the phrase, "Advise your father" is Ayah's belief that Naina can only succeed within the borders of Bedong and that Ravi should be reiterating this belief to his father. Outside of the Indian country that this community has created for itself, Naina is unable to survive, despite wanting to do so.

It is at this juncture, when Naina begins to lose his mind, that the reader begins to understand what Maniam's ultimate omission is in *The Return*. While the Bedong Indians live in an ethnic enclave and by a specific set of laws and customs that they have brought from India, their society is a necessary crutch because their existence is invalidated by a nationalist culture. Naina's failure and subsequent descent into madness is but a taste of what is to happen to the well-meaning Bedong Indian who decides to set that crutch aside. He sets it aside only to discover that he cannot stand without the crutch. Furthermore, Maniam omits any interactions Naina has with those outside this enclave. He refrains from portraying what could happen should the community confront characters like Lim's Abdullah and Samad and a government that sends the message that non-Malays are not Malaysians. Maniam does not give us an answer but leaves us to imagine the frightful possibilities that Lim presents in her novel through the May 13th riots.

History

From the perspective of the government, a corollary of non-Malays' illegitimate ethnicities is their illegitimate histories. In Malaysia, the phrase "*pendatang asing*" ("foreign comer") has most frequently been used to refer to illegal immigrants. However, in recent years, the phrase has been reinvented to pejoratively refer to non-Malay Malaysians. One's imperfect or incomplete national identity is attributed to one's foreign ancestral roots, and to have foreign roots is to have alien loyalties.

Lim and Maniam's treatment of history reflect that the past is an inextricable part of the life of an ethnic minority in Malaysia. Lim presents both sides of the debate through a heated exchange between Chester and Li An. Meanwhile, Maniam illustrates the turmoil and instability that Ravi's grandmother and father experience since they are torn between the India they come from and the Malaysia that they want to build a life in.

Lim examines how the histories of ethnic minorities, as opposed to the supposedly flawless history of the Malays, deem them less Malaysian by the standards the government has set. It is striking that Lim chooses the American Chester rather than any other character in her novel to draw attention to this construction of an indigenous history versus an immigrant history. At a dinner hosted by Li An and her husband, Henry, Chester casually says, "You know, Malay is the only real culture in this country."²⁶ The word "real" grabs the reader's attention immediately. Chester, who has been in Malaysia for little over a year, has been quickly influenced to read the Malay culture as authentic in comparison to other cultures. The very fact that Chester voices this opinion at a dinner hosted by two Chinese Malaysians suggests that he presumes that the originality of the Malay culture is accepted by other communities in the country. When the soft-spoken Henry pushes Chester to explain his reasoning, Chester responds, "The Chinese aren't really Malaysian, are they? They're here for the money. They speak Chinese and live among themselves. They could as easily be in Hong Kong or even New York's Chinatown."²⁷ Chester's opinion that the Chinese are merely mercenary immigrants who are not real Malaysians is reminiscent of Abdullah's earlier comment to Li An, "Chinese have no *adat*, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money."²⁸ Chester's first

line of reasoning, "[The Chinese are] here for the money," is not an opinion he has developed by himself. Chester has been influenced by the nationalistic sentiments of his roommates, Abdullah and Samad, who author articles "which preac[h] that there [is] only one kind of people that count, that anyone who disagree[s] should be imprisoned or sent back to China or India."²⁹ In our conversation, Lim herself said, "Chester came to Malaysia through a *bumi* point of view, that the country belonged to Malays, that Chinese were just visitors."³⁰ Chester's second line of reasoning pertains to the language that the Chinese speak. However, Chester does not simply say, "They speak Chinese." He adds to his already flawed reasoning, ". . . and they live among themselves." In Chester's mind, he connects the act of speaking Chinese with a desire to disassociate from other Malaysians and to retain a foreign history and culture rather than embrace a Malaysian present.

Li An responds to Chester's unfounded judgments:

My mother's family has been in this country for five or six generations, and some of the Malays are really immigrants who have arrived from Indonesia in the last few years. You can't make any judgments on who or what is "original." Sure the Chinese traditions came from China, but Islam came from Saudi Arabia, didn't it? And no one says it's not original. Everything in Malaysia is *champur-champur*, mixed, *rojak*.³¹

Here, Li An questions the ideology that marks the Chinese and Indians as "immigrants." She challenges Chester's misinformed understanding of immigration as a stain on one's citizenship. By using the example of Malay immigrants from Indonesia who have only been in Malaysia in the "last few years," Li An dismantles the fixity of Malay rootedness and history. She highlights that although Islam originated from Saudi Arabia, Chester would never think of calling Malay enclaves Little Saudi Arabia or Saudi Arabia Town.

Try as she might, Li An finds it impossible to understand the polemic surrounding immigrants in Malaysia. In what is her most articulate statement on the history of the second-generation minority Malaysian, Li An says:

"You cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you. How could you not grow roots, invisible filaments of attachment that tied you down to a ground, a source of water?"³²

Lim takes this worn out metaphor of the tree and recasts it in the Malaysian context. Her use of this image is particularly thought-provoking because a number of Malaysia's chief exports like rubber have foreign roots like Li An, but now have a place in the Malaysian landscape, unlike Li An. Li An's history remains a sign of her illegitimacy.

While Lim tears down the myths about an immigrant ethnic community through Li An's conversation with Chester, she neglects the turmoil and instability that is inherent in the lives of this community by only portraying the life of a sixth-generation Malaysian. However, Maniam presents the reader with precisely the tumult that surrounds the recently arrived immigrant in the form of Ravi's grandmother, Periathai; the first-generation Malaysian, Naina; and Ravi, the second-generation Malaysian. Maniam's portrayal of these three different experiences reveals a need for a more nuanced understanding of this complex relationship rather than the government's construction of the national identity.

The litany of possessions that Periathai brings from India, despite being a single woman travelling with three little children, is not simply a marker of her desire to start anew in Malaysia, but is also a sign of her need to preserve something of her Indian past as well. Not only does she bring these physical reminders of India, Periathai brings "her Indian skills and heritage"³³ to Malaysia as well. Her trades range from peddling traditional Indian garments from village to village, tinkering, and using her "special touch" to cast away the "evil eye."³⁴ However, Periathai's most poignant recreation of India is through the architecture of her house, particularly, the pillars. Maniam describes these intricately designed pillars:

"Some of the Ramayana episodes stood out . . . The sculptured fold-like flames envelope Ravana's palace and threaten to engulf Sita's tender, shapely limbs and breasts. One pillar carried the creation of the Ganges, the cascading water stilled, another the typical, rustic look of the Indian village."³⁵

Both the artisan and Periathai attempt to capture the geography, topography, literature and religion of India.

In Periathai, Maniam presents the newly arrived immigrant in Malaysia. In Naina, her son, Maniam portrays a first-generation Malaysian Indian with a pronounced desire to establish a place for himself in

this country. The battle to establish a permanent home and to develop a sense of belonging in a new land persists into this next generation. Ravi recognizes the tragic similarity between his father and Periathai. Ravi observes:

"...I began to understand the simple mechanism, I thought of the Malaysian Indian. I recognized the spirit that had touched Periathai and now possessed Naina. He continued the battle Periathai had begun: to drive some stake into the country."³⁶

There are different valences in the verbs that Maniam uses when Ravi speaks of the spirit that "touched" Periathai and now "possess[es]" Naina. Unlike Periathai, Naina is raised in Malaysia and has a far more urgent need to plant his roots in this country by building a home. This first-generation Malaysian is determined to build a house so as to "drive some stake into the country." Naina is convinced that he must ground his search for acceptance as a Malaysian in something as concrete and solid as a house. His obsession with building a house of his own in Malaysia is catalyzed by the repetition of his mother's fate when Naina also begins receiving eviction notices from the Town Office. Upon receiving these notices, Naina begins to ritualize the house-building process in the lines, ". . . [Naina] also brought pebbles, clay and *lallang* (weeds) to the house. These he laid out on a leaf before Lord Nataraja. 'Breathe your spirit into them!' he chanted. 'Make them the clay and grass of my body!'"³⁷ Those very lines preface Naina's act of uniting both his body and house with the Malaysian land when he razes it to the ground with himself in it. Overcome by insanity, he meshes his body with the "clay and grass" of Malaysia. Right before Naina immolates himself, he attempts to speak to this Malaysian environment in what Bernard Wilson calls "polyglot ramblings."³⁸ Ravi observes, ". . . [Naina] began to chant in a garbled language. It embarrassed me to hear him recite a rhythm mounted on Tamil, Malay and even Chinese words."³⁹ Naina amalgamates these different tongues in the hope of getting some kind of primeval response from the multi-tongued Malaysia in which he finds himself. He receives none.

In Naina's son, Ravi, Maniam presents the second-generation Malaysian. While to Periathai, living in her newly built house "was like treading Indian soil once more,"⁴⁰ Ravi sees the pillars of this house as telling "strange stories."⁴¹ To Ravi, a member of a younger

generation of Malaysian Indians, these carvings tell fantastic tales that fascinate his youthful mind, but they remain “strange” to him. Although Ravi cherishes Periathai, there is a clear boundary that separates the Malaysian-born child and the Indian-born grandmother. Maniam reveals this through Ravi’s narration of Periathai’s weekly Friday prayers. The narration begins, “We waited for her, seated on the *thinnai*, observing the other houses, hemmed in by hibiscus hedges, isolated by a life of their own.”⁴² As the grandchildren wait for Periathai, their attention is not centered upon her Indian house. Instead, they are drawn to the other houses that surround hers. These other houses are separated from Periathai’s by “hibiscus hedges,” forming a makeshift national border since the hibiscus is Malaysia’s national flower. To Ravi and the other children, Periathai’s India sits like an impenetrable anomaly within the middle of Malaysia.

In Maniam’s presentation of these three different generations of Malaysian Indians, Maniam portrays the multiplicity of the ethnic Indian’s experience in relation to their histories. In doing so, Maniam challenges the single master narrative that the Malay nationalist culture presents as the immigrant history rather than the many histori(es) of the ethnic Indian in Malaysia.

Language

By appropriating the English language for their novels and subjecting it to a negotiation with the Malaysian landscape, Lim and Maniam efface the boundary between the formerly colonized and the former colonizer. This is precisely the boundary that the nationalist culture has sought to impose by rejecting literatures written in English from the Malaysian literary canon. In “Hegemony, national allegory, exile: The poetry of Shirley Lim,” Eddie Tay writes, “The appropriation of language from the British center is an act of defiance against the cultural and social order prescribed by Malay nationalism.”⁴³ Writing these novels in the English language becomes a means of writing back to a new hegemony, a Malay hegemony.

It is ironic that Naina’s final words in *The Return* integrate different Malaysian languages when the Malay government has officially established only one national

language of the country. Bernard Wilson addresses the importance of the government’s decision when he writes, “In the Malaysian context, language shapes national consciousness and individual identity to an overwhelming extent.”⁴⁴ In both *Joss and Gold* and *The Return*, Lim and Maniam portray the multilingual reality of Malaysia that is negated by the nationalist culture in which Malay alone is prized. The multilingual universe that Lim and Maniam show us, challenge exclusive slogans such as “*Bahasa Jawa Bangsa*” (“Malay Language is the Soul of the People”) that continue to air on public television and radio.

In *Joss and Gold*, Li An is forced to confront her inadequacy as a Malaysian in the eyes of the government because of her love for the English language. There is no room for Li An who wishes to straddle both worlds at once, the world of the British past and the world of the Malaysian present. The novel opens with Li An’s first day teaching English literature at a Malaysian university. Lim writes, “This morning [Li An] had prepared a prose passage from D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, and she had read it aloud, relishing the overflow of sibilants like spiced chickpeas in her mouth.”⁴⁵ With the phrase “she had read it aloud,” Lim depicts a woman who is compelled to vocalize Lawrence in order to savor his work in its entire splendor.

What is most striking is that Li An’s instinctual response to and love for English is that it is inseparable from her connection to Malaysia. To her, the sound of Lawrence’s sibilants taste decidedly local. She likens them to “spiced chickpeas,” a fiery dish brought to Malaysia by Indian immigrants. While the simile of “spiced chickpeas” is in the English language, to Li An, the taste that comes to her mind is simultaneously Indian and Malaysian. Her love for the English language and its literature is framed by her understanding of the Malaysia that she has grown up in. Lawrence is tied to “spiced chickpeas,” “touch-me-nots” and “Li An[s]” rather than “Lee Ann[s].” In fact, her love for English is enriched by Malaysian sights, sounds and tastes.

However, for Malay stalwarts like Abdullah, one cannot love English and Malaysia at the same time. In a discussion at Li An’s house, Abdullah says, “Like English. Don’t want you to feel bad, yah, Li An, but English is a bastard language. In Malaysia we must all speak national language.”⁴⁶ Here, Abdullah blatantly

juxtaposes the “bastard language” with the “national language,” clearly outlining the legitimate identity of a Malaysian. Lim explained her choice of the word “bastard” in our conversation. She said, “In Malaysia, English was seen as illegitimate because it had a white father.”⁴⁷ Abdullah’s clear articulation of what “we must all speak” triggers a knee-jerk reaction from Li An:

What would happen if they all switched to Malay right now? How would [Li An] express herself? Like a halting six-year-old, groping for light in a darkened world? Her world was lit by language. The English ingested through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain.⁴⁸

In light of the intensity of Li An’s response, the initial tenderness and accommodation in Abdullah’s tone when he says, “Don’t want you to feel bad,” followed by the empathetic “yah,” now sounds trivializing. As good-natured as Abdullah is, he cannot see the gravity of his suggestion that all Malaysians must speak Malay. While Abdullah makes it seem as if there is a choice to be made between the “bastard language” and the “national language,” Li An’s reaction suggests that it is far from a choice. In my conversation with her, Lim spoke to precisely this moment in the novel:

“The English language is what Li An grew up with and she cannot forswear it. It’s in her synapses, in her brain cells. If someone came up to Li An and said, ‘Li An, from now on you are forbidden from speaking English and you can only speak *Bahasa*,’ will she be the same Li An, could she still have the same feelings?”⁴⁹

While one may be tempted to read Li An’s as well as Lim’s reaction as individuals being overtaken by the colonizer’s language, Lim highlights that it is Li An who is in possession of the language. We see this in the ownership that Li An displays when she keeps repeating the phrase “her language” to refer to English. Here, it is not English but Malay that is pressing down upon her actual identity.

When Li An asks, “What if [Malaysians] believe they need English as well as Malay?” Lim artfully depicts the lack of nuance in the Malaysian government’s approach to the language question. Lim writes, “As soon as Li An stopped her rush of questions, she saw she had

done something wrong. Samad had hooded his eyes in a blank expression, Abdullah was frowning. . .”⁵⁰ The “hood[ing] of Samad’s eyes and the “blank expression” prevent any debate in the same way that the Malaysian constitution has been written by the government to protect its monocultural creation.

Like Li An, Maniam’s Ravi has no connection to the Malay language. In fact, Ravi is enveloped in the worlds of Tamil and English. Ravi initially resides in the realm of his mother tongue, Tamil. He comes into the Tamil language informally. Ravi hears the rich orality of Tamil through the voice of the matriarch in his life, Periathai. Maniam writes:

“Then, with only a tier lamp placed in the centre of the most complicated *kolam* in the cowdung-plastered compound, Periathai told us stories. Her voice transformed the *kolams* into contours of reality and fantasy, excitingly balanced.”⁵¹

In the same way that Lim’s Li An describes her world as being “lit by language,” it is impossible to miss how Ravi’s world is illuminated by Periathai’s Tamil stories. The undeniable link that Maniam draws between light and the language that one loves is further made evident with the lines, “The [Tamil] primer I took off the shelf-shrine every Friday evening, after the *Puja*, had the gloss of a mysterious rich world. The ornamental oil lamp, with leaf motifs, the back domed, threw a cool band of yellow light on the cover and my hands.”⁵² Like Li An and her relationship with English, Ravi’s world is literally lit by the Tamil language. However, Maniam takes Lim’s image of language as light a step further by imbuing Tamil with a divine quality. He writes, “The Tamil Primer was placed before the picture of Saraswathi, the goddess of learning. The incense-brazier trembled in my hands as I waved it three times around the shrine and book.”⁵³ Not only is the Tamil Primer installed within the house shrine, the primer and the shrine become one in the same. Ravi treats both the primer and the shrine with equal reverence when his hands tremble as he waves the incense brazier around *both* the shrine and the book. This is further emphasized by the fact that his formal inductor into the Tamil language, Murugesu, is described as looking like the “pot-bellied” elephant god, Ganesha. Ravi recalls, “On such nights my voice deepened as I reeled off the [Tamil] alphabet. Murugesu looked like a god himself, pot bellied, remote and radiant with warmth.”⁵⁴ Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, the Tamil

language is depicted as both illuminating and divine in Ravi's world.

Maniam is careful not to create a monolingual universe. Despite its celestial quality, the Tamil language is not elevated above all other languages in the novel. Owing to his wife's insistence, Naina sends Ravi to a school where English is the medium of instruction. While Ravi is initially reluctant to leave his world of Tamil, he soon finds himself enticed by the English language and the English world that his teacher Miss Nancy creates in the classroom. He becomes absorbed with the adventures of Ernie, an English character far removed from his own Malaysian life in the Bedong community. Ravi even begins to miss English during his vacation from school. Ravi says, "I remembered my anxiety to speak English again, to revive Miss Nancy's world, during that bleak holiday period."⁵⁵ Naysayers may be tempted to pounce on the word "bleak" and suggest that there is a hierarchy of languages at play here. However, this world causes any semblance of hierarchy to collapse immediately for Ravi says on that very same page; "The language we spoke in the long verandah of the houses was a defiant version of English, mingled with and sounding very Tamil."⁵⁶ To Ravi's ear, English begins to sound like the Tamil language.

There is an even more distinct meshing together of languages and identity later in the novel when as an adolescent Ravi affixes "James" to Ravi and becomes "James-Ravi" to correspond with female penpals from Britain and America⁵⁷. With the hyphen, Ravi injects his experience with the English language into his name and, by extension, his identity. The hyphen also unites two discourses rather than privileging one discourse over the other. In creating such a protagonist, Maniam reflects the truth of the multifaceted linguistic identities of Malaysians and rejects the nationalist culture's belief that a single language comprises national identity.

Conclusion

In *Joss and Gold* and *The Return*, Lim and Maniam present the alienation and instability of Chinese and Indian communities that are systematically excised from the Malay government's construction of a national identity. While Lim engages in an open and direct

attack of this construction in *Joss and Gold*, Maniam engages in a more veiled critique in *The Return*.

Lim's and Maniam's portrayal of the alienation of Chinese and Indian minorities at the hands of the Malay government unconsciously anticipates Malaysia's current state of social tumult. In late 2007, in an unprecedented show of civil disobedience, 30,000 Indians took to the streets of the capital to protest against discriminatory policies that have kept them at the bottom of the social ladder in Malaysia. Such a large number of Indians took to the streets because of the government's sudden decision to demolish thirty Hindu temples in the country. While neither Lim nor Maniam claim to speak for the ethnic minorities in Malaysia, their novels present literary spaces where the reader begins to question the three master signifiers of difference in Malaysia that act as alienating forces in the hands of the government. In writing these novels, Lim and Maniam have made room for readers to question not only rabid Malay nationalism, but to see through what Lim aptly calls in her memoirs the "vacuous political fiction" and the "public relations performance" of "[t]he 'Malaysian,' that new promise of citizenship."⁵⁸ The truth behind Lim's cynicism is hard to swallow, but harder yet are her poignant words in my conversation with her, "You just want to weep for the Malaysia that could have been and is not."⁵⁹

Bibliography

Aljunied, Syed Muhd Khairuddin. "Films as Social History." *Department of Malay Studies*. National University of Singapore. Date accessed 02 Oct 2007. www.fas.nus.edu.sg/hist/doc/New_Insights_160805/2ASyed%20Muhd%20Khairuddin.doc.

Dept. of Statistics. *Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2007* Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2007.

Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia. "Nation and Contestation in Malaysia: Diaspora and Myths of Belonging in the Narratives of K.S. Maniam." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36.2 (2005): 235-248.

Gill, Saran Kaur. "Medium-of-Instruction Policy in Higher Education in Malaysia: Nationalism

- Versus Internationalization." In *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* Eds. James Tollefson & Amy Tsui. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.
- Kuppusamy, Baradan. "Malaysian Minority Indians Drift." *Asia Times Online*. 19 October 2005. Date accessed 1 March 2008. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/GJ19Ae02.html
- Lim, David. *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. *Writing S.E./Asia in English: Against the grain, focus on Asian English-language literature*. London: Skoob Books, 1994.
- . *Among The White Moon Faces*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1996.
- . *Joss and Gold*. New York: Feminist Press, 2001.
- . Telephone interview. 06 Oct 2007.
- Maniam, KS. *The Return*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1981.
- . "The Malaysian Novelist: Detachment or Spiritual Trancendence." *A Sense of Exile: Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*. Ed. Bruce Bennett. Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1988.
- . "The New Diaspora." *Internationalizing Communities Conference*. University of Southern Queensland, Australia. 27 Nov 1996.
- Perumal, Elan. "MB tells why temples have to go." *The Star Online*. 27 Oct 2007. Date accessed 22 February 2008. <http://www.usj.com.my/forum/Forum1/HTML/001089.html>
- Saw, Swee Hock. *The Population of Malaysia: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2007.
- Tang, Soo Ping. "Ralph Ellison and K.S. Maniam: Ethnicity in America and Malaysia, Two Kinds of Invisibility." *MELUS (Study of the Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States 18(1993): 81-97*.
- Tay, Eddie. "Hegemony, National Allegory, Exile: The Poetry of Shirley Lim." *Textual Practice 19.3* (2005): 289-308.
- Tham, Seong Chee. *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political & Sociological Perspectives*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981.
- Wicks, Peter. "Parameters of Malaysian identity in the novels of Lloyd Fernando and K S Maniam." *Asian Profile 30.1* (2002): 27-36.
- Wilson, Bernard. "Memory, myth, exile: the desire for Malaysian belonging in K.S. Maniam's *The Return*, 'Haunting the Tiger' and *In A Far Country*." *Textual Practice 17.2* (2003): 391-412.
- Wong, Chun Wai and Audrey Edwards. "Back to Bahasa Malaysia." *The Star* 04 June 2007. Date accessed 10 Oct 2007. <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/6/4/nation/17923478&sec=nation>

End Notes

- ¹ Saw, 78
- ² Qtd in Gill, 137
- ³ Chee, 219
- ⁴ Chee, 234
- ⁵ Qtd in Chee, 249
- ⁶ Wicks, 13
- ⁷ David Lim, 52
- ⁸ Lim, 18
- ⁹ Lim, 45
- ¹⁰ Personal communication with Shirley Geok Lin Lim, 6 October 2007
- ¹¹ Lim, 71
- ¹² Lim, 74
- ¹³ Lim, 82
- ¹⁴ Lim, 82
- ¹⁵ Lim, 46
- ¹⁶ Personal communication.
- ¹⁷ Lim, 41
- ¹⁸ Personal communication.
- ¹⁹ 278
- ²⁰ Maniam, 81
- ²¹ Maniam, 14
- ²² Maniam, 43
- ²³ Maniam, 160
- ²⁴ Maniam, 139
- ²⁵ Maniam, 170
- ²⁶ Lim, 33
- ²⁷ Lim, 34
- ²⁸ Lim, 46
- ²⁹ Lim, 63
- ³⁰ Personal communication.
- ³¹ Lim, 34
- ³² Lim, 82
- ³³ Maniam, 3
- ³⁴ Maniam, 3
- ³⁵ Maniam, 4
- ³⁶ Maniam, 147
- ³⁷ Maniam, 177
- ³⁸ Wilson, 395
- ³⁹ Maniam, 180
- ⁴⁰ Maniam, 3
- ⁴¹ Maniam, 4
- ⁴² Maniam, 5
- ⁴³ Tay, 299
- ⁴⁴ Wilson, 392
- ⁴⁵ Lim, 4
- ⁴⁶ Lim, 56
- ⁴⁷ Personal communication.
- ⁴⁸ Lim, 56
- ⁴⁹ Personal communication.
- ⁵⁰ Lim, 57
- ⁵¹ Maniam, 6
- ⁵² Maniam, 20
- ⁵³ Maniam, 19
- ⁵⁴ Maniam, 20
- ⁵⁵ Maniam, 80
- ⁵⁶ Maniam, 80
- ⁵⁷ Maniam, 118
- ⁵⁸ Lim, 122
- ⁵⁹ Personal communication.