

Obituary: K. S. Maniam (1942–2020)

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At one time, I thought of the past as dead history. I don't think so now. The past is needed to make the present alive. But there must be no slavish or desperate clinging to the past. One must be ready to let go even the most prized personal ideas and beliefs in order to come by an even more substantial grain of truth.

K.S. Maniam, "Haunting the Tiger"

The passing of K.S. Maniam earlier this year leaves an enormous void in the Malaysian literary world, and one which is impossible to fill. He was at the forefront of a prominent group of Malaysian Anglophone writers who emerged from the tumultuous events of racial and political unrest that took place in Malaysia during 1969, which included Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang and Shirley Geok-lin Lim — a group of writers whose narratives were often shaped by the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, whether within Malaysia itself and in the cultural and racial clashes that defined that period, or further afield in British, European and American theatres of interaction, long centres of white colonial privilege. Maniam, like these other writers, refused to be bound by the colonial and postcolonial—even neocolonial—classifications which sought to define their art in terms of convenient binaries. His writing went further, much further, moving well beyond the limitations of these reductive labels and exploring both the decay, and the regeneration, of human spirituality and endeavour.

Though in many ways universal in his depictions of suffering and grief, of connection and compassion, Maniam was a distinctly Malaysian writer. He wrote for and about his country, a country he loved and was frustrated by in equal parts, and his narratives returned again and again in different ways to problematizing what it is to be Malaysian and what moral and ethical responsibilities that entailed. In a way, much of Maniam's writing was about a word that remains contentious in its political use and societal implications within Malaysia itself—*bumiputra*—yet Maniam explored it in its pure, etymological sense. His protagonists were invariably motivated by their longing to be true sons and daughters of the Malaysian soil, driven by a desire to immerse themselves in the rural and urban landscapes of Malaysia in order to become part of its cultural fabric — to look, Janus-like, backwards to their disparate ethnic origins but also forward to a collective future, to merge and to regenerate into a more realistically multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural Malaysia. Just as the Sanskrit root of

the term *bumiputra* is derived from the Indian subcontinent, so too Maniam saw the term in its purest sense as an immigrant paradox, a word that should be inclusive but was more often exclusive. His characters were invariably emblematic, to varying degrees of success, of these attempts at cultural acceptance and immersion, at attaining the elusive goal of belonging.

His first novel, the semi-autobiographical *The Return* (1981), dealt with many of these elements within the Tamil-Malaysian community, through its protagonist Ravi's attempt to immerse himself in colonial Anglophone culture and educational systems, but also to tentatively embrace new Malaysian horizons — a path juxtaposed against his father's dislocation, sense of rejection, and ultimate self-destruction. Maniam's two later novels, *In a Far Country* (1993) and *Between Lives* (2003), which formed a thematic trilogy of sorts, moved further into the genre of magic realism, expressing in their content and style the hope of an inclusive Malaysia and a reconnection to a spiritual past, but also the protean and elusive qualities of such goals.

An educator, poet, playwright and prolific short story writer and children's author, as well as a novelist, much of his writing throughout his career centred upon the complex problems of immigrant integration, social acceptance, and individual and communal memory: the short story "Haunting the Tiger" (1996) and the novel *In a Far Country* are two such pointed examples of the author's strong interest in investigating paths through which a sense of exile within one's own country may metamorphosize into a shared communal purpose. Yet his stories are often also deeply concerned with the female condition, centring on female subjugation, and the silence it engenders as a form of resistance to patriarchal oppression, as may be evidenced in his collection of short stories and plays *Sensuous Horizons* (1994), which includes the stories "Ratnamuni", "The Rock Melon", and "The Loved Flaw", and the plays *The Sandpit: A Monologue* and *The Sandpit: Womensis*, each of which discusses in one form or another the intricacies of familial relationships and the victimization—but also the deep inner strength—of its female characters.

The novel *Between Lives*, in its depiction of Sumitra, the young urban professional who counsels and relocates "subjects", and her interactions with Sellamma, an elderly woman who refuses to leave her land in the face of encroaching urban development, provides an important examination of female life in modern Malaysia and its connection to past traditions, but also narrates the pressures brought to bear on modern Malaysian women bound by traditional expectations. Its conclusion is marked by a recognition of what must be acknowledged to

achieve a sense of nationhood that is not at odds with individuality, and which truly acknowledges the disparate strands of multiple pasts interwoven into a present and future, in its exhortation to be unashamed of:

... the suspicions, jealousies, the mistrust; the false self-confidence, the cringing subservience, and the self-deception. They're painful to recall, but they're also our memories, our past selves, now not to be veiled over by some comforting, superficial light. (2003: 85)

It is in words such as these that one clearly hears the authorial voice: Maniam's work was at times prescriptive and confronting, but he was as deeply committed to searching his own soul as a person and as a writer as he was his nation's.

I first met Maniam in July, 1994 when, in the early stages of undertaking a doctoral thesis on postcolonial literature, I interviewed him at Flinders University in my home city of Adelaide. I was already aware of his writing, mainly thanks to my doctoral supervisor, Syd Harrex, and I was becoming more closely familiar with his body of work and its influence on Malaysians and beyond. Over the years, Maniam and I shared time in Asia and Australia with our families, at his home in Kuala Lumpur and mine in Adelaide, in Singapore, in Hong Kong, and in many other locations. A deeply private man, Maniam retained a puckish sense of humour about what he at times saw as his literary marginalization in his own country. He was intellectually generous and committed to inclusiveness, a commitment born in part of his own sense of exclusion and perceived lack of acknowledgement within Malaysia — a circumstance which clearly hurt him but which also fuelled his deep inner fire as an artist. Ultimately, Maniam saw his place as an English-language writer in a predominantly Malay-speaking nation as one that was, in his own words, “non-protected [but] healthy”. He wanted his writing to be Malaysian in its context yet universal in its themes, to explore “the common bonds and concerns that illuminate the large and often bewildering impulse to be human” (1993-94: 23), and to compete on and be heard on a global stage because, as he argued, “being in the race with other writers globally ensures more diverse readership and gives us some standing internationally [and because] the writers in English are the ones who are putting Malaysia on the world literary map” (1993-94: 20-21). He was committed to his country and to its undeniable potential, but he wanted that potential to be realised by all of its citizens on an equal footing, without deception and with the freedom to criticize—and to be criticized. He believed that, in Salman Rushdie's words, “Free societies ... are societies in motion, and with motion

comes tension, dissent, friction. Free people strike sparks, and those sparks are the best evidence of freedom's existence” (2008: 215). That constructive criticism, he felt, should be far-reaching. It should be voiced at political, at social and at individual levels where necessary. It should acknowledge the failures, but also the triumphs, of a multiethnic society and all of the honesty, pain, and willingness for self-appraisal that that entails. In any multicultural landscape such as Malaysia, he argued, “the majorities define the minorities as much as the reverse” (2001).

In many personal conversations with Maniam, it was this abhorrence of self-deception to which he often returned. He saw it as part of the duty of any artist to be brutally honest, not only about his nation and society, but also about his own writing and the self that emerged through that writing, to be candidly forthright about the flaws—and strengths—in the human condition. He saw this most specifically as the intrinsic obligation of the writer, in his or her documentation of lived existence. In a community in which censorships of one type or another have often existed, one must never, he argued, submit to self-censorship in one’s own writing. If his final collection of short stories, *A Stranger to Love* (2018), indicated that such battles, fought on landscapes increasingly blighted by consumerism, materialistic greed and meaningless rituals were taking their toll, it nevertheless also showed Maniam still contemplating human interaction, still searching for “that more substantial grain of truth”, still up for the struggle. At a time when the understanding of “truth” is under attack on multiple levels and is constantly threatened by misappropriation on the global stage, his willingness—and his courage—to continue that fight will be sorely missed.

Works Cited

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