

Ethnic Identity Crisis in K. S. Maniam's *The Return*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the identity crisis faced by the Indian people in Malaysia. "The Return" is an autobiographical novel by K.S.Maniam, where he explores the bitter experiences undergone by the Indians in Malaysia. The novel talks about three generations of Indians Naina, Periathai, and Ravi. It exposes the hyphenated life of these people in the host land. The novel depicts how these immigrants make efforts to adjust themselves to the new land. The protagonist, Ravi faces only conflicts in his mind as he intends to master the English language. The novel focuses on the identity crisis experienced by Ravi. Even though he wishes to adapt himself and assimilate, he finds no way to adjust himself for there is an ethnic conflict that makes him realise that he cannot come up in life in the host land.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Identity Crisis, Class Discrimination, Immigrants, Host Land.

Introduction

This paper attempts to analyse the identity crisis faced by the Indian people in Malaysia. *The Return* is an autobiographical novel by K.S.Maniam, where he explores the bitter experiences undergone by the Indians in Malaysia. The novel talks about three generations of Indians Naina, Periathai, and Ravi. It exposes the hyphenated life of these people in the host land. The novel depicts how these immigrants make efforts to adjust themselves to the new land. Emmanuel Nelson observes that the "haunting presence of India" (15) lies at the core of diasporic fiction by writers of Indian descent. K.S. Maniam's fiction testifies to his observation. K.S. Maniam is a diasporic writer with a Tamil descent. He has written collections of short stories such as *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia*, and plays such as *The Cord or the Sandpit*. He has also written three novels namely *The Return*, *In a Far Country* and *Between Lives*. K.S. Maniam's autobiographical novel, *The Return*, "charts the poignant journey of self-discovery of an Indian boy growing up in Malaya and gradually moving apart from his family and immediate surroundings" (104). He gives a vivid account of the experiences of three generations of Tamil migrants in Malaysia. The first generation includes the protagonist's grandmother, Periathai, "and her struggles in her new country – Malaysia" (14). She migrates to Malaysia with her three sons. She is a hardworking woman nicknamed "Camel". She works as a tinker. It is a belief among the Indian immigrants that Periathai has the power to cast away the "evil eye" from ailing children.

Ethnic Identity Crisis in the Novel

The first part of the novel has the towering presence of Periathai, the first-generation migrant, the author has liberally employed Tamil words to flavour the dialogues like "thinnai," "kolam," "thali," "avarakai," "vadai," "thundu," "thavani," "thurnuru," "ayah," etc. There is also a reference to "Pongal" and "Thaipusam". As the novel progresses the use of Tamil words becomes nil. It symbolizes the gradual decline in the practice of the Tamil culture, tradition, and even the mother tongue by the third-generation migrants. Periathai hails from a family of farmers and she has a natural affinity towards soil. She ardently wishes to own a piece of land in Malaysia. Her dreams never realize her death. The second-

generation migrant comprises the protagonist's father, Kannan called "Naina" by all. He earns his livelihood by working as a laundryman. He tries to cling to the Tamil tongue and Indian religious practices. He appoints Murugesu to teach his son the Tamil alphabet. He specially brings books from India for the Tamil school by the Riverside Estate. It is Murugesu who prepared Ravi, the protagonist, for his initiation ceremony. Ravi had a strong admiration and reverence for his homeland, India. Ravi records, "The Primer I took off the shelf shrine every Friday evening, after the Puja, had the gloss of a mysterious rich world" (22).

Though Naina reveres his mother tongue to the core, he surrenders to his second wife's compulsion to send Ravi to the English school in Sungai Petani. Naina's decision to send him to the English school has a drastic effect on young Ravi. His mental state is recorded as "The world I had known fell apart" (23). The Tamil textbooks which are specially ordered from India contain "fields, jungles and characters" (24). He recalls, "The lines of curving, intricate Tamil writing unfolded an excitingly unexpected and knowable world" (24). His yearning for the land "one lived in but never saw" (16) is revealed through his words. Tamil festivals they celebrate in Malaysia could transport Ravi to his roots. He relates:

These festivals together with Thaipusam and Pongal created a special country for us. We were the citizens of an invisible landscape brought into existence by the lights, mango leaves strung out over the door ways, the pilgrimages to Sri Subramanya temple in Sungai Petani Thaipusam, the painting of the bull horns the day after Pongal and the many taboos that filled our daily lives. We weren't allowed out of the house between midday and two O'clock the spirits of the dead would be about. (16)

Ravi has a very strange experience in the English school in Sungai Petani. Miss. Nancy who is in charge of Ravi's class is a typical English woman who has an aversion to the unclean Tamil boys. She tries to inculcate discipline, cleanliness and hygiene in her students. He recalls, "... Miss. Nancy, with her microscope like eyes, detected an invisible grain of earth in the lines of palm or between nail and flesh (31). Ravi gives a realistic account of Miss. Nancy's obsession with cleanliness. He draws an instance to make it clear:

The education that Ravi begins to get was initially a cultural assault. What was so usual for the Hindu boys was prohibited by Miss Nancy. For instance, going to school without brushing one's teeth and having coconut oil in the hair (which Miss Nancy considers as rotten butter) was prohibited. Miss Nancy, his first English teacher was the embodiment of the colonial culture. She shaped the boys' way of thinking and lifestyle to establish the insights of social mobility. She turned a boy round. She peeked into the ear, twisting it towards the light; she ran her finger nail on the chin of the upturned face... (31)

The Indian boys were flinched by her attitude. Their mothers smoothen down their hair with coconut oil. "Black wires" (31) she yelled out on another occasion.

Miss. Nancy's classes have a profound influence on Ravi. He says, "The craving for order soon possessed me" (44). He manages to find a place for himself in his small house. He says, "I marked off a cubicle with chalk. No one could step into that imaginary room" (44). Whenever he is in that imaginary room, he is insulated from the rest of his family. His English education alienates him from his former friends who attend the Tamil medium classes. Ravi's English education instils in him a strong craving for imitating English habits. He affixes the name "James" to his name Ravi, and corresponds with his British and American pen pals. "James Ravi lived in the drawers, emerging at night, when the shop was closed, my parent gone back to hospital house" (123).

The class difference among immigrants is a distressing reality. Ravi feels humiliated when the upper-class migrants treat him as an untouchable whenever he goes to their house to collect the dirty clothes or to deliver the washed clothes. The upper-class people never like the dhobi's son getting an English education. In the hostland, "class-based discrimination in Malaysian Indian communities, such as Ravi's, is evident in the narrative." (125). His self-confidence gets eroded when he listens to their caustic remarks. The training he gets from the English school and the lessons he learnt from them are the only solace to Ravi whenever he encounters ill-treatment from the upper class. Ravi's determination and willpower help him secure a job in a new secondary school in Sungai Petani. Later, Naina relinquishes his laundry business and turns to planting and farming and subsisting on the crops that the land provides. Naina too gets the eviction notice. When Ravi gets a job, Naina feels that all the learning is a mere waste if they do not own a land of their own. He says, "We can make all the money get all the learning. But these are useless if our house pillars don't sink into the clay of the land" (175). Naina's attempt to establish a personal anchor is also futile. The ultimate tragedy for Naina is that only in death by fire does he become part of the land he wishes to claim. Unlike Periathai and Naina, Ravi is convinced that the land cannot be his. For this reason, he stands aloof from all symbols of proprietorship, from all dreams of building houses and acquiring property. Instead, he concentrates on educating himself. Mastering the English language ensures a career in teaching which requires no engagement with land. Yet Ravi's attempt to save himself by immersing himself in a foreign language is of little help. However, the greater tragedy is the knowledge brings only a little hope of a possible recovery. *The Return* is evocative and moving in its account of migrants' abortive attempts to be rooted in alien soil. Maniam is acutely aware that a noxious compound of poverty, oppression, frustration and marginality will accompany the cultural integrity of the diaspora. Maniam's novel conveys a haunted sense of cultural loss.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel portrays the bitter experience of immigrants in an alien land. It showcases the difficulties encountered by Malaysian people before and after independence, as they migrated to achieve their goals. K.S.Maniam brings to the limelight the class distinction and discrimination which result in the identity crisis.

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