Contrary to perspectives stressing diaspora as a discourse of exile and loss, this essay foregrounds the “national” tendencies and affiliations of diasporic communities. Focusing on the Southeast Asian nation-state of Malaysia, it examines the literary productions of K.S. Maniam to show how they disrupt hegemonic notions about diaspora and emphasize the transformative capacity and national consciousness of diasporic communities.

**Diasporic Translocation and “The Multicultural Question” in Malaysia**

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Fifty years or so after the inception of postcolonial studies as a field of inquiry, the issues of nation and narration, place and displacement, uprooting and re-rooting remain major paradigms for postcolonial concern and critique. The processes of mobility, transfer, adaptation, resistance, and change inherent in these postcolonial realities are challenging and transforming traditional understandings of identity and the cultural boundedness of the nation. A crucial dimension of these contemporary postcolonial realities is rooted in the processes of diaspora—dislocation, relocation, translocation—be it those unleashed by the population transfers of the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, which saw the massive displacement of peoples from India and China to serve colonial economic interests, or the post–World War II, and ongoing, migrations of people into North America, Australia, and Western Europe. Indeed, the question of how diasporic groups are positioned with reference to their histories and old homelands as well as how they position themselves in relation to their new locations has made the process of cultural translocation a complex form of signification.
Homi Bhabha articulates his understanding of the *heim* of national culture in terms not of “unisonance” but of translocative dissonance—the splits, fractures, and othernesses *within* the nation, produced by diaspora. These are powerfully invoked by his coinage “dissemiNation” (see the essay of this name in *Nation and Narration*, 291–322). Similarly, Salman Rushdie defines home as a “scattered” concept also in order to reject the nationalist mythology of an originary and unitary identity band, choosing instead to align himself with the idea of the “disseminated” nation and its fissured histories (*East* 93).

The complex confluence of inside and outside, past and present, indeed of the “genealogies of dispersion and ‘staying put’” (Brah 209), have produced new identities, new social and cultural configurations that are “neither the one nor the other but something else besides” (Bhabha, *Location* 25). In this (re)conceptualization of nation and identity, diasporic groups have not only changed themselves by picking up new accentuations and becoming established as distinctively Canadian or British or American or Malaysian, but also begun to reconfigure the very meaning of those terms. Such changes in the way diasporic communities view their identity and their place and status in their nation attest to their dynamism as well as their transformative capacity to construct a national culture of creative and selective adaptation in ways that resist total assimilation into the dominant culture. Diasporic groups are able to reform both themselves and the dominant cultural influences working upon them, allowing them to not only engage with but also create new meanings, new maps of desire and of attachment in other landscapes. This is true of Malaysia, where the descendants of colonial immigrants have created new forms of identification and allegiance that have problematized the very authority and coherence to which the term “national identity” lays claim. No longer do these second-, third-, or fourth-generation heirs of the migrations engendered by colonialism think of themselves as temporary sojourners in their nation. They are a people whose identity is no longer defined by a sense of loss, cultural impoverishment, or the absence of a homeland.

With this conception of the translocative effects of diaspora in mind, this essay aims at examining the literary productions of author K.S. Maniam with reference to their persistent reconfigurations and transgressions of the dominant narrative of a Malaysian national and cultural identity. In doing so I wish to move away from the hegemonic notion of diaspora as a discourse of exile, cultural loss, and unsettledness towards a reading of diaspora as a discourse of attachment, rootedness, and national desire. My essay also marks an attempt to displace readings of diasporic texts as non-national texts, or as texts that assert their belonging in trans- or extra-national spaces, or in the spaces between nations and homelands. Critical exegesis of Maniam’s works
has tended to focus on the aspects of exile and loss, precluding analyses of his texts’ productive potential for identity change and re-construction. Such criticism largely positions Maniam and his texts in non-national Malaysian space and reads them in relation to the past and the lost homeland (for examples of this type of reading, see Wicks or Wilson). Such a positioning forecloses any engagement with the issue of the reconfigurations and transformations of cultural and national identities as historically situated and evolving processes.

One important reason for the positioning of Maniam in non-national space is that such critics largely use diaspora as a descriptive tool or category (for theoretical approaches to this, see Safran or Cohen), not as a conceptual process (for examples of diaspora used as a conceptual process, see Gilroy or Clifford). The understanding of diaspora in such readings thus privileges diaspora as a place and narrative of “origins.” In contrast, by moving diaspora away from being merely a descriptive category and exploring it as a narrative of arrival and “becoming,” this essay seeks to open up new perspectives on the cultural politics of marginalized groups. By conceiving diaspora as a process of identity reconfiguration, it also suggests an approach to the study of diasporic groups in terms that foreground their interventions in the established discourses of belonging and national identity. Indeed, in Malaysia the notion of diasporic identity as fixed and grounded in discrete homelands is invoked insidiously by the state to both rationalize and legitimize hegemonic cultural hierarchies and their exclusionary practices. In this environment, the potential of Maniam’s writings and cultural politics to challenge such hegemonies is crucial. Yet, this aspect of Maniam’s works, representative though it is of the new realities and transitions of identity in society, remains under-researched and un-theorized. Even Shanthini Pillai’s more nuanced postcolonial re-visioning of the discursive representations of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia does not get close enough to viewing diaspora as a complex social and cultural formation or to its use as a conceptual process. It thus does not engage with how the body of Maniam’s work challenges existing hegemonies on national identity and multiculturalism and contributes specifically to a new local discourse on diaspora.

In attempting to address this gap, this essay also suggests that diasporic communities assert their cultural citizenship within the nation and claim it as their homeland, although home and homeland in the narratives of such communities are constantly shifting cultural locations with multiple genealogies. In arguing that Maniam’s texts contribute to a new discourse on diaspora that disrupts normative constructions of national culture and identity in Malaysia, I assert that the politics of diaspora is always-already implicated in regimes of power and representation. Lying at the heart of this essay’s interrogations is the issue of what precisely inheres beneath the signifier of “Malaysian.”
K. S. Maniam can be considered a leading writer of English fiction and drama in Malaysia on the basis of the body of his published work and his long and established career in writing. Born in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah in 1942, Maniam is thus far the author of three novels (The Return, In a Far Country, and Between Lives), four short story collections (Plot, The Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories; Arriving… and Other Stories; Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia; and Faced Out: Six Stories), and two plays (The Cord and The Sandpit). He has also written several important essays that share the ideological concerns of his fictional works. For Maniam, the location of the diasporic self along the translocated discontinuities of history and geography, dismissed as marginal by dominant ideology, can be invested with critical significance. In his essay “The New Diaspora,” Maniam explicitly addresses the role that diaspora and its politics of “multiplicity” can play in forging new visions of imagined community that disrupt the false stabilities and unities upon which official constructions of Malaysian national identity are founded: “We now talk of diasporas, and the double or triple spaces—temporal, cultural, spatial—they occupy. Multiplicity in thought, memory and space seems to define individuals and societies everywhere. It is no longer possible to retain the view that you come from a single-strand dominant culture. The majorities define the minorities as much as the reverse” (6). The unmooring of cultures from locations traditionally associated with them and their encounter with “other” cultures in new historical moments (a process through which both sets of cultures, as a result of their contact, are transformed) is fundamental to Maniam’s conceptualization of the “new diaspora.”

Born into a Hindu Tamil family and raised for much of his youth in a rubber estate, Maniam knows first-hand the various forms of exclusion experienced by Malaysia’s Indian diasporic community. His characters, mostly descendants of colonial-era immigrants from India, have to negotiate not only the trauma of this historical and spatial disjunction but also the ways in which the “otherness” of their different histories bears upon their current exclusion from society. It needs emphasizing that, despite their marginalization, Maniam’s characters claim a primary affiliation with Malaysia and identify with its symbols and traditions, not in assimilationist terms but in ways that involve modification and adaptation as well as resistance.

Through his privileging of a “new diaspora” aesthetics of desire and attachment, Maniam has distanced himself from the cultural politics of nostalgia and detachment that characterized the “old diaspora” and its writers, such as V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul’s dynamics of identity construction, anchored in the circumstances of an earlier moment in the narrative of colonization and an earlier historical phase of the Indian diaspora, induce in his characters deep feelings of cultural loss that stem from their
conviction that they will always be something less than the “pure” entity they would have been if they had not been uprooted from their “original” Indian homeland. Thus, to Naipaul’s characters, the idea of cultural and national belonging will always be an impossibility, because the “authentic” Indian identity that they yearn for has been forever undermined by the displacements of history. In its place is “deep disorder” (Naipaul, *Mimic* 32), the lost unities of diaspora. So his characters live, estranged from their origins and essences, their dream of coherent wholeness broken, doomed always to homelessness.¹

Naipaul’s dedication to chronicling the ravages of uprooting and dispersal is at sharp variance with Maniam, for whom diaspora and the translocative possibilities and effects associated with it are embraced as creative forces with the power to challenge established orders. Consequently, he re-articulates what Naipaul laments as diaspora’s “out of placeness” (Naipaul, *Enigma* 19) into the enabling idiom of a “multiplicity” of places (Maniam, “New” 6) in order to signify the dynamic processes of accommodation, appropriation, and resistance engaged in by diasporic communities across the globe—“people in whose deepest selves,” as Rushdie has described, “strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves” (*Imaginary* 124–25).

Indeed, the material, political, and ideological underpinnings of Maniam’s diasporic history—his maternal grandmother had migrated to Malaya from her homeland in southern India in the early years of the twentieth century—have shaped Maniam’s writing in pervasive ways. His grandmother’s odyssey was part of that “middle passage” of thousands of immigrants, mostly impoverished Hindus from south India, into Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to serve the interests of the British colonial economy. While Indians were mostly recruited to work as low-paid “coolies” in the rubber, tea, and oil palm estates, peasants from China were segregated in tin mines. Colonial strategies to “divide and rule” deliberately left the indigenous Malay peasantry to their traditional activities in the kam-pungs, or villages (see Abraham).

A quick introduction to Malaysian realities is imperative at this point in the essay. Malaysia’s population, which in 2009 stood at 28.31 million,² comprises various ethnic groups, with the numerically and culturally dominant Malays also representing the politically hegemonic community. The Malays’ claim to indigeneity is mirrored in their constitutional status as *bumiputera* (Malay for “princes of the soil.”) Together with other *bumiputera* groups, they constitute about 65 percent of the total population.³ Malaysians of Chinese descent, who are perceived as holding considerable economic power, account for 26 percent, while those of Indian ancestry represent just under 8
percent of the population. A great majority of ethnic Indians and Chinese are descendants of immigrants transported into Malaya to service colonial economic imperatives.

Although the Malaysian state has put in place a policy of multiculturalism, based on the National Culture Policy of 1971, members of the Malay community are accorded special privileges on the grounds that it is they who constitute the nation’s bumiputera community. Such an absolutist notion of nationness, by linking “belonging” to geography and history, invokes claims of ownership, homeland, rights, and authority. In short, the bumiputeras belong because they own the land; they were there first. Malaysia is their rightful homeland, and the diasporic Indians and Chinese have their own homelands of India and China, respectively. Official constructions of national culture and multiculturalism in Malaysia, then, drawing as they do from hegemonic processes of fixing, division, and categorization inherited from colonialism, have simply become another Janus-faced discourse that produces as well as legitimates inclusions into, and exclusions from, the imagined community of the nation. In these formulations of the “national,” the diasporic “other” is the object of either cultural assimilation or national exclusion. Indeed, it is the nationalist construction of the hierarchical dichotomy between the “indigenous” bumiputera and the “immigrant” pendatang (Malay for “newly arrived”) that has been responsible for the persistent deferral of the status of “national” to Malaysians of immigrant origins and to their cultural constructions.

Represented as the “unrooted” other in nationalist ascriptions of identity, Maniam problematizes the hegemonic construction of indigeneity so as to make us re-assess the authority of taken-for-granted narratives about national place and belonging and move towards new practices of multiculturalism. Urging us, like Bhabha, to “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” (Location 1), his novel In a Far Country interrogates the assimilationist premise that is built into the dominant narrative of Malaysian nationhood. In the novel, Zulkifli, a Malay, tells Rajan, an ethnic Indian, that he can only possess the “spirit” of the land if he makes an excursion into “tigerland,” the heart of the jungle. Only after seeing the tiger and “look[ing] at the country through its eyes” (93), Zulkifli asserts, can Rajan find full acceptance in the country. In Malay mythology, the tiger—“the oldest symbol of [Malay] civilization” (129), as Zulkifli tells Rajan—is said to possess qualities of bravery, grace, and majesty. In linking these qualities with the land, Zulkifli assigns those same qualities to his indigenous Malay forebears. Invoking his deep roots and continuous “ancestral memory” (95), Zulkifli tacitly reminds Rajan of his own immigrant background and lack of historical rootedness to the land. Urging Rajan to “free [himself] from thoughts given to [him] by the past” (96) and to leave his Indianess
behind in order to experience the “primeval” reality of the tiger (99), Zulkifli takes Rajan deeper into the heart of the country. As he is led further and further into the jungle and away, symbolically, from his “origins,” Rajan suddenly becomes aware that what he is being asked to discard is a vital part of him, his personal history. It is at this point that Rajan realizes that the precondition for full belonging in the country is for him to “disown whatever [he] was and to merge with the tiger” (101). This fear of “cultural moulting” (42) that is required so that he sheds his difference in the attempt to be assimilated into a homogeneous whole fills Rajan with the terror of self-extinction, and he flees the jungle.

Through Rajan, Maniam eschews the ritual of assimilation that operates in the nationalist mythology of Malaysia that requires diasporic communities to jettison their cultural history if they are to be accepted as participants in the historical narrative of the land. Maniam’s rejection of the mythology of the tiger is again evident in his essay “The New Diaspora,” where the tiger functions not only as an assimilationist trope, but also as a static and ultimately exclusionary model for representing national and cultural belonging. Because it remains rooted to the particular geography of the jungle, never crossing the discrete boundaries to which it is bound, the tiger as a model of national accommodation attempts to root the individual in a clearly demarcated and homogenized space. It thus is fixated with the narrative of origins, of the authenticity of people and cultures. In the essay, Maniam refers to his story “Haunting the Tiger,” where he advances the trope of the chameleon as another way of thinking about national belonging. The chameleon, because it is able to “inhabit, simultaneously, different intellectual, cultural and imaginative spaces” (“New” 8), possesses that vital ability to move, to “make that leap” (“Haunting” 45) across cultural boundaries. Because it enters different geographical spaces and places, the chameleon allows for the ways through which encounters unfold and identities shift, realign, and coalesce in space and time. In short, the chameleon is more concerned, in Paul Gilroy’s terms, with the cultural contingencies of routes than with the stabilities of roots (11).

It is in relation to the exclusions of the nationalist discourse of Malaysian multiculturalism that Maniam has delivered a valuable critique of the concept of “pragmatic tolerance” (“New” 5), where the presence of minority cultures is recognized as being “tolerated” by the state and/or majority culture. Such a language is revealing of the play of power in the hegemonic discourse of the nation-state, which prides itself for being magnanimous in having accorded formal political accommodation to its minority communities. The very epithet, “tolerance,” implicitly makes clear the subordinate status of diasporic groups; as Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk assert in Diaspora and Identity, “tolerance is not much if we start from a
degree of inequality [. . .]. [It] implies a notion of the norm, of the centre [. . .] as the privileged site from which tolerance is deployed” (137). While the state admits its diasporic communities into (legal) citizenship of the nation, it denies them cultural membership of it. Importantly, Maniam also argues that the notion of “tolerance” reveals the dominant culture’s “reluctance to enter into the perspectives offered by other cultures” (5, emph. mine). This ends up with its harbouring the fantasy of the “otherness” of diasporic communities, the notion that, as Ien Ang argues, these communities have their own separate homelands and therefore do not belong “here” (17).

The chronology of Maniam’s literary works suggests that the transformations in Malaysian society are a response to changing social and historical circumstances. Viewed collectively, his writings, from the earliest published short fiction to his most recent work, chart the trajectory of the Indian diasporic community of Malaysia from the period of its early domicile in Malaya, beginning in the early twentieth century (and corresponding with the high point of the colonial policy of recruiting labour from India), through Independence in 1957, right up to the close of the twentieth century and the brink of the new millennium.

The early short stories, which were first published in 1981 in *Malaysian Short Stories*, edited by Lloyd Fernando, capture an earlier phase of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. They offer insights into the experiences of alienation, anxiety over the loss of cultural continuity, and nostalgia—that Naipaulian longing for a “pure time” of fulfilment in “the landscapes hymned by [one’s] ancestors” (Naipaul, *Mimic*, 32). The protagonist of one of these short stories, “Ratnamuni,” is the Indian immigrant Muniandy, who had arrived in Malaya with nothing other than his *uduku*, a small drum used in Indian ceremonial activities. The *uduku* is crucial to Muniandy as it keeps him connected to his home culture and its traditions. “The Lord Siva danced and made the world” (34), he tells the recruiting agent at the emigration depot in Madras who asks him why he is bearing nothing more. He makes a living as a “boatrower” on the River Krian, playing his *uduku* while ferrying strangers from one bank to the other. He is as yet unable to see the creative potentialities of his in-between position as he moves to and fro, in a replication of that earlier crossing from Madras to Malaya through the Bay of Bengal. For him, it is merely a crossing from “one darkness to another darkness” (35). But the fact that he meets his wife Malini—a “name without a caste” (35), as he tells us—on the boat is a reminder that the “purity” inscribed on the Indian identity that Muniandy clings to, of which his *uduku* is a marker, has already been defiled by his crossing of the ocean’s *kala pani*, the black waters. Like his wife, Muniandy too has already lost caste. He is thus, symbolically,
freed from the constraints of the past—the first step, the text suggests, in the remaking of the self in the new cultural location. But Muniandy is overcome by the new location’s contending scripts. When the wife he loves commits suicide because she can no longer hide the truth that their son, Ratnam, is actually hers by another man, their neighbour Muthiah, Muniandy is forced to confront the unassailability of that “other” truth. Driven by rage, he kills Muthiah and is taken away by the police. But even as Muniandy’s story ends in the “darkness” of violence, Maniam concludes the narrative by allowing his protagonist to acknowledge his Malaya-born son’s “inauthentic” genealogy—“Out of the blood that is not mine, he is mine” (63), he says to the detaining officer to whom he has been narrating his life story. However, because this reconciliation comes at the end, it forestalls the possibility of the text’s engagement with new inscriptions of identity that Muniandy’s affirmation of his “impure” present, as symbolized by the illegitimacy of his son’s birth, suggests. Thus, at the same time that Maniam draws attention to the trauma of diaspora and cultural dislocation, he also asks, can even the revered *uduku*, as an emblem of origins, of an unchanging and stable identity, help the immigrant survive the pressures of the new cultural location?

Maniam’s new diasporic consciousness does not allow him to represent the Indians of Malaysia as a culturally lost people, doomed to a life of mimicry on alien shores. In his later short stories (see the stories collected in *Haunting the Tiger* and *Plot, the Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories*) and especially in the novel *The Return*, as I will demonstrate, there is the suggestion, congruent with the larger processes of historical and adaptive change at work in Malaysia, that the power of nostalgia for the old homeland and uncritical identification with its traditions have given way to the compulsion to connect with the “new” culture, to be “part of the water and soil of the earth” (*Return* 182). Muthu, the protagonist of “Haunting the Tiger,” is a second-generation Malaysian of Indian origins, who, on his death-bed, dreams not of India but of the “fresh, green land” and “the resinous soil” (38) of Malaysia. Distancing himself from his parents’ dreams and desires to return to India, he claims Malaysia as his default and only homeland: “They can give up this land for a life they’ve known . . . But what do I have to give up?” (38). The narrative thus marks an important temporal, ideological, and cultural change in the social identification of diasporic groups.

Concomitant with his view of the necessary as well as inevitable process of “indigenization” of diasporic culture, Maniam proposes new, more resilient and adaptable cultural signifiers. In the play *The Cord*, in which he explores the saga of Muniandy in greater detail, it is the *thundu*, the traditional shawl, in contrast to the *uduku* and its unbending, pedagogical wisdom, that is offered as a new marker of “Indian” cultural identity in Malaysia. In India, says Muniandy, the *thundu* “carried dignity,” but “in this
country, it has turned into a rag. I use it as a whip, I use it to soak up the sweat on my body. It's a thing of many uses. I never thought about all of them when I was there" (72). While it suffers “debasement” in the new location, the thundu also sees an extension of its uses, demonstrating a flexibility that would have remained undiscovered in the old homeland. The thundu, then, is an expressive form that articulates the creative, improvisational nature of diasporic identity. Through it, the past is brought into being in the present and infused with new relevance and resonance.

It is this same new diasporic vision in Maniam that cautions one against relying uncritically on the past and “a vaguely remembered cosmogony” (Plot 70) to look for materials to construct identities in the time-space of the new cultural location. In “The Pelanduk,” the inhabitants of a squatter site relocate themselves further from the main road, and the undesirable influences it implies, to be “close to the jungles and the hills” (Plot 70). Having “lost contact with India for more than a generation,” the villagers set up a “pattern of life” that is designed to keep “interrupt[ion]” from the outside to a minimum (70). “Consolidat[ing] the ritual of retreat they had developed over the years,” the villagers hold a cleansing ceremony where they are asked by Govindasamy, “the guiding spirit and pundit of their community,” to remember the story of Maricha, the golden deer that Rama hunts and kills in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana (70). Maricha is a rakshasha (demon) that has, on the evil Ravana’s bidding, transformed himself into the deer to entice Sita, Rama’s wife. “We’ve to find that deer,” Govindasamy tells the villagers. “In this country it’s called pelanduk. Someone has to hunt down and kill the pelanduk” (74). In thrall to the power of “the magical past,” the villagers and their pundit cannot make the vital distinction between their cultural mythology and their present reality, between Maricha, the elusive deer of the Ramayana, and the pelanduk (Malay for “deer”) that lives in the jungle near their settlement (74). They are convinced that to preserve their traditions, the evil pelanduk must, like the evil deer of the epic, be killed. However, Maniam shows that the attempt to ward off other cultural influences, which is what motivates the villagers in their “holy mission” (89) to send Arokian and Pandian into the jungle to hunt for the deer, like Rama did in the epic, can only be self-defeating. In the story, the person Arokian hunts down and kills in his religious and cultural frenzy is his partner, Pandian, the young newcomer to the village who consciously distanced himself from uncritical allegiance to tradition in order to create his own meanings. In Arokian’s deluded cultural consciousness, Pandian was the symbol of change that had to be eliminated. For Arokian, Maricha, with its “constantly changing colours [. . .] and hues” (73), and the “swift and graceful” (88) Pandian, “all silk and folds one evening, creases and coarseness the next” (88), were one.
For Maniam, the well-being or “becoming” of the Indian diasporic community lies, not with its retreating from new cultural realities by looking back uncritically at the cultural myths of the past, but rather with its ability to engage with, as well as transform, the present through the generation of appropriate symbols rooted in the new realities. His writings thus turn attention away from the semantics of loss, detachment, exile, and alienation associated with the old or classic discourse of diaspora to issues of hope, connectivity, adaptation, and new beginnings.

Although he jettisons an idealized look back at the past, Maniam is nevertheless keen to show that the past is not an illusion. That one’s cultural history is real can be gleaned from its concrete and tangible symbols such as the *uduku* and the *thundu*. The concept of diaspora as well as the notion of “return” associated with it precisely acknowledges that history. Indeed, the idea of “return,” whether real or symbolic, is a prevalent theme not only in diasporic literature but in postcolonial literature in general. For Maniam, the “return” to the past is necessary because it is a source of cultural memory, but the past is also an indispensable resource for remaking the national present.

Maniam’s semi-autographical first novel, *The Return*, first published in 1981, carefully explores the concept of diaspora in relation to the idea of “returning.” Specifically, the novel’s titular motif of “the return” as a response to an exclusionary state forms the thematic as well as temporal structure of the book. In his move to re-inscribe his diasporic history as part of the national history of Malaysia, Maniam deliberately opens his novel on the note of arrival, with the image of the immigrant grandmother who “came […] 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, silver lamps and pots, at the junction of the main road and the laterite trail” (1). This culturally and politically resonant moment of the grandmother’s arrival in colonial Malaya, replete with her cultural baggage—“her tin trunks, mats, silver lamps and pots”—is, within the novel’s main temporal framework, being recalled three generations later by her Malaysian-born grandson, the novel’s narrator, Ravi. While the dominant narrative of nation in Malaysia places under erasure the histories of communities who are regarded as historical outsiders to the land, Maniam makes his narrator mobilize his ancestral resources by going back to the earliest point of his cultural memory—to what Vijay Mishra, quoting Ranjana Khanna, calls “both collective memory and the origin of memory” (2)—to excavate his foundational narrative in Malaysia.

The novel’s narrative shifts back and forth between three generations of the family: the immigrant grandmother, known fondly as *Periathai* (“Big Mother”); her son,
Kannan; and her grandson, the narrator Ravi. Throughout these narrative shifts, the novel falls back on the subjective power of human memory to undermine notions of linearity in hegemonic constructions of identity. Flitting between past and present, departure and arrival, an older and a newer cultural consciousness, the novel traverses and transgresses boundaries that are generational, temporal, and also spatial. This cross-cutting movement to recuperate a personal and cultural history also constructs the nation’s translocated constituencies.

Furthermore, by beginning his novel with the immigrant’s moment of arrival in Malaya, Maniam suggests that it is the dynamics of diaspora, of cultural translocation and its routings, that provide both the temporal and the causal logic that will allow the narrator’s biography and that of his nation to be told. In addition, the insertion of a diasporic narrative into the national story is a vital means by which Maniam interrogates the “rooted” semantics of indigeneity and belonging that operate in state-sponsored discourses of identity.

Upon her arrival, the grandmother, with Biswas-like determination, clears land, builds one make-shift house after another, each one less precarious than the last, “to drive some stake into the country” (147). A tinker, a pedlar, a healer, a farmer, a pioneer, and, above all, a dreamer, she is the tenacious cultural consciousness that the novel’s narrator, her grandson, discovers he must come to terms with if he is to “understand” what makes him a “Malaysian Indian” (147). Through his education in an English-medium school, the narrator acquires a language that allows for his upward social mobility. It also offers him escape from the dreams and preoccupations of his Indian cultural community.

The novel traces Ravi’s journey into maturity as he gradually realizes that what he had once dubbed his father’s “irrational” and “immature” attempts (177) at building a house so as to not die “houseless” (166) are actually fed by Periathai’s “intense, private dream” (176) to “earn a home in this land” (147). Like Periathai, who desires to stake a claim of ownership in Malaya on the grounds that “she had occupied that bit of land long enough to be its rightful heir” (9), Kannan too becomes “possessed” by the “battle that Periathai had begun” (140) to assert her rightful presence on the land. But unlike his mother, who, determined though she was to belong, had been content with kolams drawn upon the sand, Kannan goes further by wanting to construct a house out of the very materials yielded by the land. “We can make all the money, get all the learning,” he tells his son, “But these are useless if our house pillars don’t sink into the clay of the land” (167). Thus, in contrast to Periathai, Kannan moves deeper into the heart of the country. Periathai had built “that real house of hers” (4), as distinct from the earlier makeshift houses, in accordance with the architectural style of South Indian
houses, with a thinnai (a raised, cement veranda) and entrance pillars elaborately carved with stories from the Ramayana. Kannan, however, erects a simple house of planks and “drive[s] poles, trimmed and shaped out of jungle trees, into the ground” (167). Similarly, the shrine-room he builds in his house by the river’s edge is decorated with “a tree trunk, swathes of lallang, clumps of grass, bank clay shaped into a hut” (180)—organic symbols that tellingly speak of the “inexhaustible energy” (173) behind his efforts to “root” himself in Malaysian soil. It is significant that these artifacts from the earth have replaced Periathai’s bronze lamps, personal articles such as the “hand-woven silver-and-gold sari, bangles and a thali” (5), and the ritual vessels made out of Indian clay, all of which she had brought with her from her homeland. These artifacts, which were integral to the identity construction of Periathai and her generation of immigrants, and which functioned as tangible symbols of their connection, however tenuous, with their Indian homeland, have lost their relevance for the second generation, Maniam suggests. In fact, putting these away after denouncing them as “useless,” Kannan creates new objects of worship out of clay from the nearby riverbank. Paralleling this attempt at cultural modification and innovation is Kannan’s endeavour to mould a new vernacular out of Tamil, Chinese, and Malay words. Although his “secret language” appears “garbled” (180) to his still-uncomprehending son’s ears and he eventually chooses suicide as a way of staving off the persistent eviction notices from the government’s Town Council authorities, Kannan’s “frenzied” toils in his garden, like his daily ritual of “purification” in the river next to his house in the woods, are symbolic expressions of staking a claim to belonging that do not go unnoticed by the narrator, his son. Towards the end of the novel, as he surveys the fields cultivated by his father, the narrator observes that “Chillie plants, long beans, lady’s fingers and other vegetables grew abundantly. The air smelled of manure, turned earth and plants in flower” (162). Kannan’s ambition to belong and to identify culturally and psychically with Malaysia germinates, takes deep root, and flowers, even as the state grants him, as it did his mother, only “a temporary tenure” (166). The novel thus adroitly captures the inevitable processes of historical change and cultural adaptation over successive generations of a diasporic community. A telling manifestation of the hybrid configurations engendered by the cultural re-routings of the new diaspora is the way pebbles, clay, lallang (weeds), grass, and other organic matter from the land are placed on the banana leaf before the statue of Nataraja in the shrine-room erected by Kannan. “The product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong[ing] at one and the same time to several ‘homes’” (Hall 310), these are offered by Maniam as the new cultural and national symbols.

More significantly, these endeavours by Kannan mark his attempts to create his own starting point in his nation, his own narrative of origins. The constructed and
hybrid configurations of his symbols of belonging in themselves suggest that Maniam eschews a focus on origins in “essentialized and natural terms” (Brah 192). But while there are points of similarity and convergence that can be made over and over again in the “becoming” of diasporic subjects, there are also differences that define their particular history. Periathai's tier lamps and blackened Nataraja statue that alone survive the fire in which Kannan immolates himself together function as a signifier of “the original spirit” (5), the marker of the “Indian skills and heritage” (3) by which not only Periathai and Kannan but also Ravi were shaped. In the novel's end, these are all that remain of Periathai and her cultural possessions. Through their ineffaceability, the Nataraja figurine and brass lamps serve as a trace of that “difference,” that untranslatable cultural “presence” that will continually disrupt any assimilationist attempt to homogenize Malaysian national identity. This itself is suggestive that diaspora is a creative and innovative, but also fraught, site where mainstream and excluded cultures meet, enter into dialogue, and define themselves in order to live inside “with a difference” (Hall 235).

Thus, while he privileges “return” to the past for the purposes of cultural and national recovery, Maniam makes it clear that the journey from “feelings, lustreless, cultureless” to “the clay taste/the deep-rootedness” of national belonging can only be reproduced and re-presented in the light of “arrival,” with respect to present experience (183). That is, the present is not conceived as constituting a break with the past, or with cultural history. Rather, the national present is revealed in its fragments, in its translocated discontinuities. Indeed, as the narrator gradually pieces his life together through the act of narrative composition, he realizes at the end that in telling his story he has also been telling the story of his father and grandmother before him. The suggestion is that the narrator is not really removed from the cultural worlds of the past that shaped his father and grandmother, but is always-already a part of the process he recalls. “I had not walked away from Naina or Periathai, for they were still vividly in my mind” (182), he declares at the novel’s, and his story’s, end. Maniam’s enduring message, then, is that the quest to “return” to the past is a quest not so much to create wholeness out of fragmentation as to discover that fragmentation is always-already a part of the national whole.

Indeed, in rejecting totalizing concepts of national and cultural identity that are firmly rooted in historical continuity and cultural coherence, the novel's narrative structure and time frame suggest that Malaysianness cannot be whole unto itself, or unbroken, that it is always-already constituted by the narrator’s “frustratingly fragmented” (68) cultural subjectivity as a diasporic subject. And in showing that national identity is constructed through the very process of “returning” to the past, Maniam suggests that cultural history provides vital resources for national reconstruction, recovery, and renewal.
The translocations of the “new diaspora,” while drawing attention to the transformational capacity of diasporic groups, also pose serious questions about the nature of the “national” in Malaysia. I have tried to demonstrate in particular that in the literary imaginings of homeland and nation posited in the works of Maniam, the state-endorsed “fantasy of the national ‘people-as-one’” (Bhabha, “Unpacking” 207) is constantly disrupted by the reality of the marginalized yet resistant discourses of diasporic groups. In an era when identity politics are being played out in an arena dangerously suspended between a dominant Eurocentric cultural universalism and ethno-nationalistic claims of the supremacy of “origins” and notions of “indigeneity” that are separatist and exclusionary in nature, I want to emphasize that the translocations of diaspora, as embedded, problematized, and theorized in Maniam’s writings, can provide an alternative paradigm from and through which to rewrite hegemonic narratives of nationhood.

NOTES

1/ I am aware that not only Naipaul but also his critics have contributed to the myth of his “homelessness.” I am also aware that Naipaul’s attitude to both India and the Caribbean has been deeply ambivalent. However, a consideration of these issues falls outside the scope of this essay.

2/ Figure released on the official website of the Department of Statistics, Malaysia: <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/>.

3/ The Malay claim to indigeneity has been interrogated by several groups and remains a controversial issue in Malaysian society.

4/ In addition to these three main ethnic communities, there are several other constituent groupings; the official category of “Others” (which includes the Eurasians) stands at around 1 percent of the total population.

5/ Malaya became known as “Malaysia” in 1963 when Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak came together to form the fourteen-state Federation of Malaysia. Singapore was expelled from the Federation in 1965, over ideological conflicts, and subsequently became an independent state.

6/ Interestingly, in this context the word pelanduk (sometimes alternated with kancil) also alludes to the “smart” mousedeer that is featured in traditional Malay folklore.

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