

Constructing and Deconstructing the Ancestral Homeland: Images of Diaspora in Contemporary Malaysian Novels in English

Chuah Guat Eng

(First published in *Diaspora Studies*, Journal of the Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives, New Delhi, India, Volume 4, Number 1, January-June 2011, 77-95)

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09739572.2011.10597354>

In recent diaspora studies, definitions of the term *diaspora* have become both more comprehensive and more nuanced (Cohen, 2008). However, the core elements of the diasporic identity remain unchanged: namely, a past dispersal from an original homeland, identification with co-ethnic communities within and outside the host country, and a relationship with the host country made problematic by the opposing demands on the community's emotional, cultural and political allegiance by both the ancestral homeland and the host country. It is perhaps indicative of a fundamental kinship between traditional diaspora and nationalist ideologies that a similar narrative underpins Malaysia's national literature policy, which classifies only literature originally written in the national language (Malay) as 'national' literature and those written in non-indigenous languages (for example, in Tamil, Chinese, and English) as 'sectional' or 'communal' literature (*sastera sukuan*).

When the policy was first instituted in 1971, the rationale advanced for this classification was that *sastera sukuan* writers – then overwhelmingly the middle class, urban, and university educated descendants of Chinese and South Asian immigrants – had no experience and knowledge of the country's social reality: the world of the rural Malay (Tham, 2001, 52-53). As such, it was assumed that these writers concern themselves only with matters related to their own ethnic communities and not with national issues such as national identity and unity. Implicit in the rationale is the idea that the descendants of immigrants who write in their ancestral languages continue to have ties of allegiance to their ancestral homelands, while those who choose to write in English have, in addition, ties of allegiance to Britain, the former colonial master. It may thus be argued that the 'one nation-one language-one culture' ideology underlying the national literature policy, implicitly positions Malaysian literature in non-indigenous languages as essentially diasporic. In 2003, this positioning was

simultaneously made explicit and brought into line with post-colonialist and globalisation trends in diaspora theory when the question was raised as to whether Malaysian literature in English (MLIE) as a whole should be classified as ‘diasporic’, since it belongs linguistically to the pool of world literatures in English (Omar, 2003).

In one respect, and in the novel genre, it can be said that MLIE is a diasporic activity. In a survey of 45 novels that were first published between 1965¹ and 2010 by 28 novelists, it was found that 21 (75 percent) of the novelists are of Chinese or South Asian descent, and they account for 36 (80 percent) of the novels published. Of the 21 non-Malay writers, 10 (48 percent) are foreign-based. The foreign-based writers, who may be considered ‘twice diasporic’ because they are part of the Malaysian diaspora, are particularly prolific. Although they entered the MLIE scene only in the mid-1990s, they have in a matter of 15 years published 18 novels; whereas the home-based writers have produced only 26 novels in the 45-year period under study (see Tables 1 & 3). However, in the last decade or so, there have been two significant changes in the ethnicity and domicile profile of MLIE novelists. First, not all foreign-based novelists are non-Malays; at the time of writing, there is one Malay foreign-based novelist. Secondly, from 1995 onwards, all new novelists of Chinese extraction have been foreign-based. This means that the only new novelists on the home front have been of Malay and South Asian extraction (see Table 2), with Malay writers having a slight edge in terms of numbers, although South Asian writers are more productive (see Table 3). If this trend continues, where more Malays (whether home- or foreign-based) contribute to the MLIE novel genre, many of the assumptions underlying the 1971 policy affecting MLIE literature will have to be re-examined.

Table 1
MLIE Novels: Incidence of Single or Multiple Novel Novelists

Ethnicity	Home-Based Novelists		Foreign-Based Novelists		Total
	Single	Multiple	Single	Multiple	
Malay	5	1	0	1	7
Chinese	2	2	4	3	11
South Asian	3	4	1	2	10
Total	10	7	5	6	28

undermine, the maintenance and strengthening of close ties with the ancestral homeland.

In this discussion, the term ‘Malaysian novels in English’ (henceforth ‘MLIE novels’ or ‘novels’) is defined as novels originally written in English by those who claim to be either current or former citizens of Malaysia. These novelists are divided into ‘home-based’ and ‘foreign-based’. Home-based writers are defined as Malaysian citizens domiciled in Malaysia; foreign-based writers are those who live in other countries as either citizens or permanent residents of those countries.³ The term ‘ancestral homeland’ refers to the land from which the novelists (or their characters) derive their ethnic or cultural identity; the term ‘host country’ refers to the land in which the novelists (or their characters) settled. Unless otherwise stated, the adjectives ‘Chinese’, ‘Indian’, ‘Sri Lankan’, and ‘Malay’ refer to the ethnic origin of the writers or their characters and not to their nationality. The terms used to describe different kinds of diaspora are based on Cohen’s typology (2008, 18).

Diasporic Experience and the Crisis of Identity in MLIE Novels

Viewed as diasporic literature, MLIE novels present a challenge to diaspora theory because nearly all MLIE writers were born and spent their formative years in Malaysia,⁴ and many of them descend from families that have settled in the country for several generations. This means that no writer has any direct experience of the trade or labour diaspora that occurred during the era of British imperialism. The only writers today who have personal experience of the diaspora are the foreign-based ones, and their experience is the post-colonial – or what Cohen (2008, 8) terms ‘de-territorialised’ – diaspora of the late twentieth-century globalisation. The significance of this is that the crisis of identity or loyalty that writers experience, as direct or indirect subjects of the diaspora, can be rather complex.

Theoretically, home-based non-Malay MLIE writers would experience a three-way split of their allegiances, between the ancestral homeland (China, India, or Sri Lanka), the trans-national English-speaking world, and Malaysia, the last of which is the land of their birth and upbringing but, nevertheless, only a host country and not the ancestral homeland. The allegiances of foreign-based non-Malay writers would be split four ways, by the ancestral homeland, the English-speaking world, their new host country, and Malaysia, which is not simply a former host country but the land of their birth and upbringing. Foreign-based Malay writers (currently limited to a membership

of one) would have their allegiances split three ways – by the host country, the English-speaking world, and Malaysia, which is both the land of their birth and their ancestral homeland. It will be seen that for all three groups, the most problematic aspect of the diasporic experience would involve the relationship of the writers with Malaysia because of the country's multi-valence. No matter what the diasporic circumstance, it always presents itself in some combination of two or more of these roles: host country, land of one's birth, ancestral homeland, and the former host country.

It is, perhaps, as a result of this problematic relationship that Malaysia plays such a dominant role in MLIE novels, overshadowing the ancestral homeland as the preferred setting for the narratives. About 90 percent of MLIE novels are set in Malaysia or British Malaya-Singapore or both, and although there are novels set in other Asian countries, only one is set in China and two in India. Slightly more numerous are novels depicting aspects of the ancestral homeland in portrayals of first-generation individuals in the diaspora (that is, the first immigrants) and the ancestral traditions and values they brought with them.

Portrayals of the Ancestral Homeland Used as Fictional Setting

As mentioned earlier, there are only three novels set in China or India. The two set in India are by home-based writers: *Junos* (1995) by Marie Gerrina Louis is set partly in the 1930s Calcutta and partly in the 1950s Singapore; while *The Twice Born* (1998) by Uma Mahendran is a framed narrative, where the frame is contemporary Malaysia, and the main story takes place in ancient India at the time of the Aryan conquest of the Indus valley. The *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* (2008) by foreign-based Chiew-Siah Tei is a story of a family involved in opium farming, and is set entirely in late nineteenth-century China. Bearing in mind that to the diasporic Malay, Malaysia is the ancestral homeland, *Dark Demon Rising* (1997) by foreign-based Tunku Halim Abdullah, set entirely in Malaysia in the 1970s, is included for discussion here.

The most striking feature of the foreign-based novels is how easily their portrayals of the ancestral homeland fit into concepts of imperial China and rural Malaysia in the popular mind and in the mass media. Tei's China is redolent of opium, corruption, cruelty, and family rivalries. While one may say that the presence of these negative themes indicates a critical attitude towards the ancestral homeland, one also has to say that such themes are the mainstay of Chinese narratives found in stories and

operas dating from imperial times and in present-day *kung-fu* movies and television soap operas. Abdullah's ancestral homeland, too, is made of the stuff of popular Malay narratives, specifically the world of Malay magic inhabited by demons, sundry evil spirits, and *bomohs* or shamanistic healers with magical powers.

Of interest is that Abdullah constructs his ancestral homeland on a conceptual framework that has supported Malay literary and popular culture since the 1930s, when the impact of modernisation began to make itself felt in Malayan society. This framework is the 'rural-urban dichotomy' (Tham, 1977, 197), in which the city stands for everything that is morally bad and the rural environment stands for everything that is morally good.⁵ It should, therefore, be noted that although Abdullah's novel is set in Malaysia, the ancestral homeland proper is not the whole country but the Malay rural heartland. Shazral, the hero of *Dark Demon Rising*, is not a returning émigré but an up-and-coming lawyer enjoying a Westernised and somewhat irreligious lifestyle in Kuala Lumpur. When his father dies, he is forced to return to his village, rediscover his true nature, and continue his father's shamanistic work of combating evil spirits. Such work, it is made clear to the reader at the end of the novel, is not just incomprehensible but inconceivable to outsiders. Thus, although the novel is not about the diasporic experience in the conventional sense, its urban-versus-rural conceptual framework gives its plot many of the features of the diaspora: a sense of unease in a new and uncongenial environment; an idealised concept of a homeland based on collective memories and myths; and a drive not only to return, but also to preserve the spiritual essence and uniqueness of the homeland. Abdullah's ancestral homeland is a mono-ethnic and inward-looking affirmation of its exclusive exoticness. This exoticness may be an effect deliberately aimed for, because Abdullah specialises in Malay ghost stories. On the other hand, since the novel is set in the 1970s, he could have intended his portrayal of Shazral to reflect the mindset of some Malay nationalists of that period.

The ancestral homelands in *Junos* and *The Twice Born* are no less imaginary than Tei's China and Abdullah's Malay village; but they are constructed on the frameworks of recorded history rather than on the ethnocentric or ideological frameworks of folklore and popular culture, and they are inhabited by characters of different ethnicities and cultures. These two features open up the fictional space for the introduction and problematisation of issues related to the historiography and experience of the diaspora. The value of using recorded history as a framework for

fiction lies not so much in that it gives the reader a frame of reference for checking the veracity of fictional events, but rather in that it can give the reader a new perspective on historical events and how they have been written. In Louis's *Junos*, for example, the time and place chosen for the portrayal of the ancestral homeland is Calcutta in the 1930s, where the orphaned street urchin, Ashok Junos, is adopted by an Englishman. Later, through a series of events, including a highly unconventional, inter-ethnic romantic liaison, he leaves for Singapore where he settles and builds a business empire. Ostensibly, it is a rags-to-riches diaspora story, and the account of events in the ancestral homeland may beggar belief. But in fiction, what matters is that events, no matter how improbable, could conceivably be possible; for it is the combination of the possible and the improbable that enables the reader to discern a level of meaning (regardless of whether the author intended it or not) that questions, destabilises, and undermines 'official' histories which tend to generalise selected facts into universal truths – in this case, the assumption that all colonial masters were exploitative and all Indian immigrants to Malaya-Singapore labourers.

In Mahendran's *The Twice Born*, the juxtaposition of people of different ethnicities in the ancestral homeland enables the discussion of issues central to diasporic life, specifically the clash of civilisations. The novel uses the Hindu metaphysical framework of reincarnation to launch its discussion. The main character is Dr Visvanathan, an elderly Jaffna Tamil Malaysian and paediatric psychiatrist in a teaching hospital. When the novel begins, he is an unhappy man, estranged from his wife and daughter because of his refusal to accept his daughter's marriage to a man of a different ethnicity. In the midst of treating an autistic boy, he suffers a cardiac arrest and falls into a coma. While in this comatose state, he relives his previous existence in India at the time of the Aryan invasion of the Indus valley. In that life, he was the tutor and spiritual mentor of the present-day autistic boy. Through the account of the conflicts between the invaders and the invaded, and through the philosophical discussions between the mentor and his pupil, the novel discusses issues related to the encounter of two civilisations: conflicts arising from differences in physical appearance, language, gods, ways of worship, and ethics; cultural and political hegemonic ambitions leading to social divisions, discriminatory laws, limited social mobility, and the marginalisation of minorities; and the need to find ways to co-exist peacefully. No attempt is made in the novel to convince the reader that the theory of reincarnation is the truth; indeed, the scientifically oriented Dr Visvanathan remains

sceptical to the end. However, as the narrative draws to a close, one finds him applying the lessons learned from the *déjà vu* experience to his present-day problems. He reconciles with his wife and looks forward to seeing his daughter again, and to meeting his son-in-law and new grandson for the first time. Mahendran's treatment of the ancestral homeland thus offers her readers a historical (and, if one believes in predestination, a metaphysical) perspective on similar problems of social integration in contemporary, multi-ethnic Malaysia.

Portrayals of Ancestral Homelands through First-Immigrant Characters

Although the majority of MLIE novels are written by descendants of Chinese and South Asian immigrants, there are not many novels with portrayals of first-immigrant characters – that is, characters representing first-generation individuals in the diaspora. There are, of course, mention and brief descriptions of the first ancestor to immigrate, but many of them merely establish country of origin and occupation. For reasons that have yet to be ascertained, portrayals of first-immigrant characters are hardly to be found in novels by writers of Chinese descent, but they occur frequently in novels by writers of South Asian descent. Here, six novels where first-immigrant characters are essential to the plot or theme will be considered: *Scorpion Orchid* (1992) by Lloyd Fernando, first published in 1976; *Flowers in the Sky* (1991) by Lee Kok Liang, first published in 1981; two novels by K S Maniam, *The Return* (1993), first published in 1981, and *In a Far Country* (1993); *The Rice Mother* (2002) by Rani Manicka; and *The Banana Leaf Men* by Aneeta Sundararaj (2003). These novels shall be discussed in the order of their first publication date to facilitate the discernment of socio-historically related trends and patterns, especially in terms of whether, and how, fictional portrayals of first-generation individuals in the diaspora and their memories are used to address the issue of split loyalties.

Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, set in British Singapore in the 1950s, is a study of how the inability of all the characters to transcend their ethnic differences causes the atomisation of society and the dispersal of its members. The two first-immigrant characters are Santinathan and his sister Neela, who had moved to Singapore as teenagers. Their father had been the well-respected area postmaster in a small village near Madurai in Tamil Nadu in India, but for unstated reasons had decided to save up in order to relocate to Singapore. The family is, therefore, representative of British imperialist, but not its labour or trade, diaspora. Santinathan's and Neela's brief,

shared recollection of their ancestral homeland consists mainly of happy afternoons of games and impromptu sports competitions organised by either their father or Santinathan, but there is an undertone of violence and feudalism. Their younger sister, Vasantha, is mentally slow, as a result of which she used to be bullied by the other children at school and by their boy servant at home. Even Neela had once slapped her for being pesky; and on discovering the servant's ill treatment of Vasantha, their father had given the boy a severe thrashing. While in Singapore, their father was killed during a Japanese bombing raid, after which they were looked after by an uncle who made sure that Santinathan went to university, but not Neela because she is a girl.

These experiences affect Santinathan's and Neela's attitudes to the host country in different ways. Santinathan is portrayed as confused and contradictory. He insists that Singapore is where he 'belongs', but secretly regrets having left the ancestral homeland. He is a brilliant student, but gets expelled and ends up working as a dockyard labourer. He talks a great deal about getting rid of the British, but will not take part in his Malay friend's fight for independence. And although he claims to love the Malay woman with whom he has had an affair, he abandons her because he is too fearful of circumcision to convert to Islam and marry her. In contrast, Neela is portrayed as being independent and courageously unconventional. She is expecting her English lover's child, but she will not marry him and live in Britain. Nor will she return with her uncle to India. Instead, she heads for Malaya, soon to be an independent nation, where she hopes to make a fresh start free from the restrictions of both traditional Indian society and colonialist British society. It seems reasonable to conclude that Fernando intends the reader to think of Neela as the more desirable citizen of a new nation, because she is more likely to give it her full allegiance.

Discarding old mindsets and adapting to new circumstances in the interest of social integration and nation building is also a major theme in Lee's *Flowers in the Sky*. The novel, set in peninsular Malaysia in the late 1970s, has a number of elderly first-immigrant characters, most of them South Asians; but the main characters are Venerable Hung, a Chinese Buddhist monk; Mr K, a financially successful surgeon originally from Sri Lanka; and Mrs K, whose father had been an high-ranking police officer in Madras in India. Infused with Zen⁶ deconstructive humour and irony, the narrative takes us into the minds of Hung and Mr K as they recall their lives in their ancestral homelands and their experiences upon first arriving in British Malaya. Their memories reveal that their ancestral homelands were not ideal societies and their lives

there full of hardship, whereas the host country has offered them opportunities to accumulate wealth and move up on the social ladder. Nevertheless, they cling rigidly to their concepts of correct behaviour, based on traditional Chinese beliefs and a faulty understanding of Buddhist philosophy in Hung's case, and on British-South Asian colonial standards in the case of the English-educated, Christianised Mr and Mrs K. As a result, they keep their distance from the local people and are constantly critical of the ignorance and systemic corruption they see in the host country, while failing to come to terms with their own ignorance and inner corruption. The reader is not given a direct insight into Mrs K's mind, but that she has the same mindset is made evident in the account of the novel's central conflict, where her disdainful and uncompromising attitude in a confrontation with a crowd of Hindu devotees brings the situation to the edge of violence. The conflict is finally resolved thanks to the diplomatic attitude and compromising spirit of a Malay police officer, but the novel ends with a comic scene of total misunderstanding between Hung and Mr K because of their ignorance of each other's culture and their lack of a common language of communication. The nation-building message is clear: immigrant communities must stop clinging to their sentimental memories of their ancestral homelands and learn to live with others in the host country with an open mind and in a spirit of compromise.

If Fernando's and Lee's novels advocate detachment from the ancestral homeland and wholehearted commitment to the host country, now their new homeland,⁷ Maniam's *The Return* problematises their proposition by highlighting the obstacles to landownership faced by Tamil immigrants of the labour diaspora. The story, told from the point of view of the local-born, English-educated Ravi, begins with the arrival of his grandmother, Periathai, and her three sons at the small village of Bedong. Presumably a widow, Periathai ekes out a living as peddler of *saris* from India, travelling tinker, occasional faith healer, small-time farmer (during the Japanese Occupation), and *vadai* seller. Periathai does not talk about her memories of India, but when she eventually builds her first real house, another immigrant from India brings a part of the ancestral homeland to her by carving scenes from the Ramayana on the pillars in return for free board and lodging, so that for her the house is 'like treading [on] Indian soil once more' (Maniam-1, 1993, 3). Periathai's house may be interpreted as symbolising one way of transforming the host country into the new homeland – namely, by grafting loyalties to the ancestral homeland onto the host country. However, Periathai's hold on her piece of the new homeland is tenuous, because the

house is built on government-owned land and she is constantly threatened with eviction. Despite repeated petitions, she is never granted ownership of the land, because she 'had no papers, only a vague belief and a dubious loyalty' (Maniam-1, 1993, 8). She stubbornly ignores the town council's eviction orders until, towards the end of her life, she is given a reprieve because she is dying of cancer. Years later, after Independence, Ravi's father, Naina, goes through a similar experience, defiantly staying in a house he has built on what must always be 'borrowed land', because 'some government [that is, Malay Reserve] land can't be bought' (Maniam-1, 1993, 158). In the process, he comes close to losing his mind, much to the frustration of Ravi, who cannot understand why he will not accept the temporariness of his stake in the host country as Periathai had done. Thus, the first-immigrant characters in the novel serve to highlight the marginalised position of the Tamil estate worker and to raise the question: 'What will the host country give in return for his or her loyalty?' The word 'return' in the title may therefore be understood as referring not only to Ravi's homecoming after an educational sojourn in Britain, but also to the issue of reciprocity, without which the immigrant can never wholeheartedly believe that the host country is his or her homeland.

In Maniam's second novel, *In a Far Country*, the theme of the inability of immigrants to sink permanent roots in a non-reciprocating host country is explored again, this time not in terms of landholding, but in terms of ethnic and cultural identity. The first-immigrant character is the father of Rajan, the narrator. It is significant that the father's accounts of his ancestral homeland are based on romantic stories told him by his great-grandfather, of bold Indian travellers who carried their boats overland 'passing through sandalwood-scented forests' (Maniam-2, 1993, 5). His own memories are limited to the inhuman conditions he and his fellow indentured labourers endured on the sea crossing from India to British Malaya, where the life of relentless labour in the estates is relieved only by regular resort to cheap alcohol and occasional festivals celebrated with all the ancestral rites and ceremonies faithfully observed. It is also significant that Rajan, locally born and bred, English-educated, and exposed to the multi-ethnic society outside the estates, feels alienated from his father's way of life. To him, the older man's vicarious memories of the ancestral homeland are unimaginable, the festival rites and rituals incomprehensible, and the older generation's resignation to a life of alternating between bitter regret and alcohol-induced euphoria unacceptable. The ancestral homeland and traditions are thus not

portrayed to celebrate or to idealise them, but to lead to the question: 'If not this, then what?'

The rest of the novel is about the narrator's attempt to find a sense of belonging in the host country's Malay-Muslim culture.⁸ Rajan's quest ends in a retreat to, and a re-affirmation of, his ancestral culture because, according to his Malay guide, the conditions for belonging are a full assimilation of the Malay-Muslim way of life and a total erasure of his ancestral heritage. It may be tempting to read Maniam's novel as an ethnocentric retort to Fernando's portrayal of Santinathan in *Scorpion Orchid*. However, it has to be remembered that there is a gap of about 16 years between the two novels, and during that time the implementation of Malay-centric policies instituted in the early 1970s, which coincided with an Islamic revivalism, had given rise to and fostered the politicisation of Islam and the Islamisation of politics, which was perceived by many Malaysians, especially non-Muslims, as 'little more than a guise for Malay political-cultural-social dominance' (Yousif, 2004, 39).

A sub-theme running through Maniam's novels is the lack of comprehension between his locally born and bred, Western-educated narrators and the first-immigrant and other traditionalist characters in their families and communities. This comprehension gap is the main theme in the two novels to be discussed next. In foreign-based Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, the first-immigrant characters are Lakshmi and her nameless husband, both Jaffna Tamils. As the title and the husband's namelessness indicate, the focus is on Lakshmi, whose story is typical of British imperialist diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1930, at the age of 14, she is married off to a much older man and immediately thereafter taken to British Malaya, where her husband has worked for some years as a clerk on a rubber estate. During the next six years, she bears him six children. Strong-minded despite her youth, she grows into a capable housewife and mother, and survives a personal tragedy during the Japanese Occupation. Although she has never met people of other ethnicities before her arrival in Malaya, she gets on well with her Chinese and Malay neighbours, and has a particularly warm and mutually supportive friendship with her nearest neighbour, the ill-used concubine of a wealthy Chinese man. However, as a consequence of her hardships and the tough choices she often has to make, she becomes harsh, demanding, and undemonstrative with her family, and (as the blurb on the back cover of the paperback edition says) 'the family bears deep scars on its back and, in turn, inflicts those wounds on the next generation'.

The plot in this book is rather complicated and does not need any elaboration here. Of interest is that the novel is structured as a collection of accounts of past events by three generations of family members that has been put together by Nisha, Lakshmi's great-granddaughter. The effect of this multi-perspective narrative structure is that the reader gets different versions of, and new insights into, the same events, which means that Lakshmi's account of events is often contradicted by the accounts of the others. These contradictions undermine her reliability as a narrator and indirectly put in question her idealised accounts of her ancestral homeland as, for instance, '... the most magical, most beautiful place in the world' (Manicka, 2002, 7); and her rationalisations for betraying a Chinese neighbour's daughter to Japanese soldiers in order to keep her own daughter safe, or for loving some of her children less, simply because they have weak legs, or take after their unhandsome father, or have dark complexions. Thus, although in terms of plot, themes, and tone, the novel seems at first reading to be a somewhat sentimental, somewhat sensational, family history in the 'Asian diaspora' genre, on closer inspection one detects a subversive element, which makes one aware that Lakshmi has more or less the same faults as some of the first-immigrant characters in the novels discussed above. Like the Buddhist monk, Hung, she creates and clings to idealised memories of her ancestral homeland; like Santinathan, she is prepared to be friends with people of other ethnicities, but has no qualms about betraying them if her own interest is put at risk. In addition, she will discriminate against her own children on the basis of their skin colour. Yet the overall intention and tone of Manicka's understated, almost hidden, subversion of Lakshmi's self-perception is compassionate. Like Nisha, the collector of memories, the reader is led to understand the reasons for Lakshmi's actions, accept what cannot be undone, and then move on.

In home-based Sundararaj's *The Banana Leaf Men*, subversion is openly expressed and delivered with humour, irony, and wit in the language and voice of the young, contemporary, English-educated, upper middle class Malaysian. The subversive intent is not levelled at the ancestral homeland and its traditions and values *per se*, but at the English-educated, upper middle class, Malaysian Indian community and the way they cling to their ancestral prejudices. The story is told by Avantika (Tika), who, approaching the age of 30 and thoroughly disenchanted with corporate life in the nation's capital city, returns to her home in Alor Star, capital town of the state of Kedah. Aware that her chances of meeting a prospective husband are limited

in the small town, she decides to have a marriage arranged for her in the traditional way. On hearing of Tika's decision, her aunt Nirmala, a first-generation individual in the diaspora, takes charge – and so becomes a key figure in the narrative and the main target of its irony.

An interesting feature of the novel's first-generation individuals in the diaspora – Tika's mother and aunt – is that they are not representative of the trade and labour diaspora of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They are modern, English-educated Indians who followed their hearts to Malaysia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The mother, Kamala, was a young doctor in a hospital in India in 1964 when she met Sivadas, a Malaysian accountant on holiday in India. After a whirlwind romance, they had married and settled down in Alor Star, where she set up a small private practice. Meanwhile, Nirmala, who had been condemned to lifelong spinsterhood by many astrological charts, had decided in 1971 to travel the world. Her first stop was Alor Star, where she met Sivadas's employee and best friend, John Isaacs, a Roman Catholic Indian Malaysian. She converted to Christianity, married John, and became a kindergarten teacher; while John, having made money on the stock exchange, set up his own company. They then moved to Penang and became members of the upper middle class, characterised by a need to own 'Everything' and an obsession with 'Style, Quality and Excellence'.

The situation where a Westernised, nominally Hindu but generally unconventional, Indian woman voluntarily submits to an arranged marriage is unusual. But it is made more unusual by the fact that Nirmala, the self-appointed matchmaker, is a Roman Catholic convert who claims to be an expert on the required traditional Indian customs and conventions. The portrayal of Nirmala centres largely on her self-conscious efforts to find the right balance between her new and her ancestral religions. In the process, she creates problems for herself, the extended family, and now Tika. Uncertain of how her family members should be addressed because hers is a 'mixed' marriage, she devises a non-conforming system of family honorifics that confuses friends and acquaintances. To add to the confusion, Tika has to address her simply as 'Nirmala', and not 'Aunt'. Despite the fact that her being married testifies to the unreliability of astrological charts, she insists on consulting Hindu astrologers for suitable dates for the weddings – even church weddings – of all the children of her friends. Naturally, the advice of an astrologer is indispensable in the quest for a suitable husband for Tika.

The portrayal of Nirmala and the contradictions and anomalies arising from her identity problem is the centre point of a critical survey of the issues of self-perception and communal identity that beset the Malaysian Indian upper middle class, which consists largely of individuals one or more generations removed from their first-immigrant ancestors. Through Tika's narration of the matchmaking endeavours and her jaundiced observations of her various suitors, the reader gets an insight into the community's linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity; the suspicion and disdain with which each group looks upon the others; and the confusion of anomalies and contradictions ensuing from this state of affairs. Two examples will suffice: even though they all speak the same language, there is mutual contempt between Indian Tamils and Jaffna Tamils from Sri Lanka, and almost universal contempt for 'Estate Tamils'; and despite the high incidence of 'mixed marriages' in all manner of configurations within the community, mixed marriages are spoken of with disapproval.

This criticism is not limited to the Indian community. The focus may be on one community, but the author's critical eye scans the whole nation, zooming in on racial prejudice, ignorance of one's historical and cultural heritage, and rampant materialism. These faults of the nation are crystallised in Tika's make-up. Her self-acknowledged fault is her ignorance of Indian history and culture; her unacknowledged faults are her pet dislikes: Malaysians who have emigrated, and Chinese. In her opinion, Malaysians who have emigrated have an 'unleashed' obsession 'to put Everything [sic] in Malaysia down' (Sundararaj, 2003, 214), and she invariably refers to the Chinese and all things Chinese as 'chinki'. Cleverly, the author combines Tika's acknowledged and unacknowledged faults and turns them on her. Ironically, it is from her cousin's emigrant friend, Shelly, who has lived in London for many years, that Tika learns of the great Indian empires of Southeast Asia in the past, and the prosperous trading posts established by second-century Indian travellers in her home state of Kedah. It is her half-Chinese friend, Sharmini, who is Tika's 'one stop centre for information on Hindu mythology'. And it is in order to fit into a *cheongsam* (tight-fitting Chinese dress) for her first date with a prospective suitor that the food-loving Tika starves herself for two weeks.

Manicka and Sundararaj are women at least one generation younger than Fernando, Lee, and Maniam. Their novels focus on family and community, and do not explore concepts of social integration and nation building as obviously as the older writers do. Due to the family-oriented nature of the narratives, there are relatively few

major characters of other ethnicities in their novels. The reader is made aware of the multi-ethnic nature of their fictional worlds mainly by the frequent mention and descriptions of the younger characters' apparent preference for non-South Asian food, clothes, friends, lovers, and spouses. It cannot be assumed from this, however, that the novelists take inter-ethnic harmony and national unity for granted; nor can it be assumed that they discuss food and clothes with great frequency because they are women and it is in the nature of women to be concerned with such quotidian matters. No, on the one hand, food and clothes occur so frequently in the narratives because they serve to dramatise the differences in worldview and cultural biases existing between the ethnocentrically inclined first-immigrant characters (or characters with a first-immigrant mindset) and the younger, westernised characters, for whom cultural diversity is a way of life.⁹ For the younger characters, the 'other' is not the ethnic other outside the home and community, but the traditionalists in their families, with whose standards and values they have to come to terms. In this respect, the novels are about the search for identity, where the search is not motivated by the desire to return to the ancestral homeland, but by the need to find the right fit and place in the convergence of traditional-contemporary, East-West, mono-ethnic-multi-ethnic, and communal-cosmopolitan cultural continua. And to the extent that all these cultural continua are the threads that form the intricately woven fabric of Malaysian society today, it cannot be said that these novelists are indifferent to national issues.

Conclusion

In this survey of how diaspora experiences are represented in MLIE novels, 10 novels with portrayals of either ancestral homelands or first-immigrant characters were examined – seven by home-based novelists and 3 by foreign-based novelists. Most of the novels show characteristics indicating that the writers are more concerned with promoting social integration among the multi-ethnic communities at home than with mobilising solidarity with their co-ethnics around the world. Indeed, there appears to be a tendency on the part of the novelists to distance themselves from their ancestral homelands. This is evident not only in the rarity of novels set in the ancestral homeland, but also in the way first-immigrant characters are portrayed as unhappy and confused individuals who are out of touch with reality because they are unwilling and unable to adapt to the ways of the multi-ethnic host country. Two related themes run through most of the novels. One is the need to free oneself from ethnocentric and

sentimental attachments to the ancestral homeland and commit oneself to getting along with the multi-ethnic others in the host country. The other is the search for an identity that can comfortably accommodate ancestral history and heritage, as well as all the other cultural influences encountered in Malaysian society.

Finally, while it is true that most MLIE novelists are descendants of Chinese and South Asian immigrants and write about their own ethnic communities, the communal focus is not expressive of an ethnocentric longing for an ancestral homeland. It is, rather, an attempt to find in the imagined diasporic experiences of their ancestors a perspective from which to understand the persistence of ethnocentricity in the present, and to help the nation move on to a more culturally inclusive future.

The **author** is a Malaysian novelist and Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia. The gist of this article was first presented as a paper at the GOPIO (Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin) International Academic Forum II on the theme 'PIO Diaspora: Emergence and Road Map', held at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 2 April 2010.

Notes

- ¹ The year 1965 is selected as the starting point of the survey because it marks Singapore's political separation from Malaysia and, arguably, the separate development of English-language novels in the two countries.
- ² The research project is funded by Universiti Putra Malaysia under the Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship Scheme.
- ³ Place of domicile is given precedence over citizenship status in the case of foreign-based writers, because in this study the focus is on the perceptions of the writers of their relationship to Malaysia, which may be affected by geographical distance and not just legal status.
- ⁴ To the best of the author's knowledge, there are only two writers who were not born in present-day Malaysia: Lloyd Fernando (1926-2008) born in present-day Sri Lanka; and Tash Aw (1971-), born in Taiwan to Malaysian parents.
- ⁵ Discussing the impact of modernisation on pre-war Malay literature, Tham (1977, 194) wrote: 'Malay writers typically differentiated, directly or indirectly by reference or allusion, between the symbolic environment of the urban areas and the symbolic environment of the rural areas. The symbolic environment of the urban areas was structured of a set of meanings which included immorality, irreligiosity, greed, perversity, arrogance, self-interest, injustice and crude materialism. The symbolic environment of the rural areas, on the other hand, carried such meanings as kindness, patience, co-operation, moral perfection, loyalty, piety, modesty, gratitude, respect and manners.'
- ⁶ The phrase 'flowers in the sky' is a Zen metaphor for delusions and illusions, especially those based on faulty or unexamined views, theories and ideologies.
- ⁷ Fernando and Lee were born in the mid-1920s, and their treatment of first-generation immigrants show an affiliation with the post-war, pre-independence Leftist English-

speaking Intellectuals (LESI), whose approach to building national unity out of a multi-ethnic society called for a non-ethnocentric willingness to know, adapt to, and adopt aspects of one another's culture without altogether losing their ethnic identity (see Chuah, 2010).

⁸ For a fuller discussion of Rajan's cultural quest in *In a Far Country*, as well as Maniam's continuing exploration of the theme of reciprocity by the host country in his third novel, *Between Lives* (2003), see Chuah, 2010.

⁹ Leo Lowenthal reminds us in *Literature and the Image of Man: Communication in Society* (1986, 2) that '... the writer is not so much concerned with objects, events, or institutions as with attitudes and feelings which his characters have about them it is the portrayal of *how* he [that is, the character] reacts to ... common human experiences that matters, since they almost always have a social nexus'.

References

- Abdullah, Tunku Halim. 1997 *Dark Demon Rising*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk.
- Chuah, Guat Eng. 2010 *Strangers in the Land of the Birth: Concepts of Social Integration in Portrayals of the Malay in Contemporary Malaysian Novels in English* (Paper presented at the International Seminar on 'Fictions and Factions in the Malay World', at Goethe University, Frankfurt, 11 and 12 November).
- Cohen, Robin. 2008 *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Second Edition, London: Routledge.
- Fernando, Lloyd. 1992 *Scorpion Orchid*, Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International.
- Lee, Kok Liang. 1981 *Flowers in the Sky*, Singapore: Federal Publications.
- Louis, Marie Gerrina. 1995 *Junos*, Singapore: Heinemann Asia.
- Lowenthal, Leo. 1986 *Literature and the Image of Man: Communication in Society*, Volume 2, New Brunswick (NJ): Transaction Books.
- Mahendran, Uma. 1998 *The Twice Born*, Kuala Lumpur: Platinum Press.
- Maniam-1, K S. 1993 *The Return*, London: Skoob Books.
- Maniam-2, K S. 1993 *In a Far Country*, London: Skoob Books.
- Maniam, K S. 2003 *Between Lives*, Petaling Jaya: Maya Press.
- Manicka, Rani. 2002 *The Rice Mother*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Omar, Noritah. 2003 'Malaysian Poetic Licence: Writing Home and Away', in Nena Bierbaum *et al* (eds). *Regenerative Spirit: Polarities of Home and Away, Encounters and Diasporas in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Volume 1, Adelaide (SA): Lythrum Press, pp 105-117.
- Sundararaj, Aneeta. 2003 *The Banana Leaf Men*, Kuala Lumpur: Sensations Pro.
- Tei, Chiew-Siah. 2008 *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes*, London: Picador.
- Tham, S C. 1977 *Malays and Modernisation: A Sociological Interpretation*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Tham, S C. 2001 'The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia', in M A Quayum and P C Wicks (eds). *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, Petaling Jaya: Longman, pp 38-66.
- Yousif, Ahmad F. 2004 *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: An Islamic Response to Non-Muslim Concerns* (Paper presented at the International Association for the History of Religions, Yogyakarta, 27 September to 3 October (http://i-epistemology.net/.../850_Ajiis21-4%20-%20Yousif%20-%20Islamic%20Revivalism%20in%20Malaysia.pdf/ --- accessed on 30 October 2010).

