

Looking at South Asian women writers

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Malaysian novelists of South Asian (i.e. Indian and Sri Lankan) descent have long dominated the local English-language literary scene. This is hardly surprising since most of them are second- or third-generation descendants of English-educated immigrants who came here to fill administrative and professional positions in the colonial government. To a large extent, however, they dominate by being more prolific than the novelists of other communities, and by being therefore better known. Among those who have published multiple novels are Lloyd Fernando, K. S. Maniam, Marie Gerrina Louis, Rani Manicka, and Shamini Flint.

Keeping to our theme of “writing the nation”, we shall look at two lesser-known novels: Uma Mahendran’s *The Twice Born* (1998), and Aneeta Sundararaj’s *The Banana Leaf Men* (2003). Both authors deal with their cultural and historical heritage from their present perspectives, and their novels represent two distinctly different literary approaches to the problems of social integration and national unity faced by English-educated members of an ethnic minority

A fairly common criticism of our South Asian women novelists is that they focus exclusively on their own communities and show no interest in national issues. A more careful reading will show that this criticism is baseless. In nearly all the novels, the fictional world portrayed is multi-ethnic, characterized by the frequent presence of 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. No, the presence of other-ethnic friends, lovers, spouses, food and clothes serves to dramatise the different worldviews and cultural biases of the older generation on the one hand, and the culturally diverse way of life of the younger generation on the other. Indeed, a sub-theme running through the novels is that the younger characters are often in conflict with the older members of their families. The

theme of nation-building is thus presented as explorations of how the younger, “Malaysianised” generation has to negotiate a space for themselves between the “otherness” of their ancestral traditions at home and the “otherness” of their fellow Malaysians outside the home.

In Mahendran’s *The Twice Born*, the theme of inter-generational cultural conflict is explored from the perspective of the older generation. Dr Visvanathan, a Jaffna Tamil Malaysian and paediatric psychiatrist in a teaching hospital, is estranged from his family because he refuses to accept his daughter’s inter-ethnic marriage. While treating an autistic boy, he suffers a cardiac arrest and falls into a coma, during which he relives his previous existence in India at the time of the Aryan invasion of the Indus valley, when he was the tutor and spiritual mentor of the present-day autistic boy.

Through the account of the clash of civilisations caused by the invasion, the novel deals with many issues that are familiar to Malaysians because they have to do with nation building: conflicts arising from differences in physical appearance, language, gods, ways of worship, and ethics; the struggle for cultural and political supremacy leading to social divisions, discriminatory laws, limited social mobility, and the marginalisation of minorities; and, ultimately, the need to find ways to co-exist peacefully.

In Sundararaj’s *The Banana Leaf Men* the same theme is explored with humour, irony, and wit in the language and voice of Avantika (Tika), a young, contemporary, English-educated, upper middle class woman. Approaching the age of 30 and thoroughly disenchanted with corporate life in Kuala Lumpur, Tika returns to her home in Alor Star. 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 takes charge. Thus is set in motion a series of comic events related to Indian matchmaking practices, which the author uses to launch a critique of the English-educated, upper middle-class, not only of the Malaysian Indian community but also of the whole nation.

Through Tika’s narration of the matchmaking endeavours and her jaundiced observations of her various suitors, we get an insight into the Malaysian Indian community’s linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity; the suspicion and disdain with which each group looks

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upon the others; and the confusing anomalies and contradictions ensuing from their clinging to their poorly understood ancestral traditions. And through the portrayal of Tika and her character flaws, the author's critical eye scans the whole nation, zooming in on racial prejudice, ignorance of one's historical and cultural heritage, rampant materialism, the prejudice against those of other ethnicities and those who have emigrated, and the "unleashed" obsession "to put Everything [sic] in Malaysia down".

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In these two novels, then, we find that although the focus is communal, the discourse is national. Each in its own way is concerned with exposing the inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts that beset the nation and pointing the way to a culturally more inclusive future.