

## BOOK REVIEW

**REMEMBERING K.S MANIAM THROUGH A COLLECTION OF SELECTED  
OEUVRES, K.S MANIAM: SELECTED WORKS, BY  
K.S. MANIAM, MAYA PRESS, 2019, 297 PAGES. ISBN: 978-983-2737-58-2**

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### REVIEW

To review a book on K.S Maniam's selected works is to write about the legacy of a Malaysian early prolific writers. This book is indeed a testament to Maniam's vast oeuvres which include novels, short stories, plays and poetry. On the afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2019, scholars and fans of Maniam's works gathered at an event organized by the University of Nottingham Malaysia, to celebrate this much loved and respected Malaysian writer, commemorating him through readings as well as a book launch on this book titled *K.S Maniam: Selected Works*. Extracts from this selection were read by a number of people that day, reflecting the range of Maniam's literary genius.

Many would know and remember Maniam's first novel *The Return* (1981) well, which is aptly placed as the first text to open this selection of his opus. Reading of Periathai's descent "suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow" leaves an indelible mark in the reader's mind long after reading the text while introducing with it the myriad of challenges faced in the first-generation Indian migrant experience in Malaya (p.5). The extraordinary opening in *The Return* (1981) then, is all about beginnings, thematically establishing the text. Thus, much can be extrapolated from this extract of *The Return* (1981), as it begins to uncover well-worn themes seen throughout Maniam's writing and this collection of selected works – that of home and belonging, alienation and displacement, identity and arrival. This selection is testimony to the depth of Maniam's writing, his familiarity with the nuances and intricacies of his country. Maniam further complicates ideas found in *The Return* (1981) in his other novels *In A Far Country* (1993) and *Between Lives* (2003), both of which are also included in this selection. The interpolation of memory, identity, belonging and home permeates the extracts selected, once again offering astute, sometimes polemical explorations of multiplicity. The importance of Maniam's novels is certainly emphasized in this selection because they offer new ways of reading while simultaneously considering difficult questions on Malaysian-ness and postcoloniality.

As a writer, Maniam was perhaps best known for his novels and short stories but this book has wider offerings which cover his less known but still well received genres, his poetry and plays. The two plays, *The Cord* and *The Sandpit: Womensis* included in this book discloses pertinent issues. The struggle for belonging and identity within hostile physical and cultural landscapes is a reality for both men and women. Maniam subtly depicts the often unacknowledged, 'silenced' experiences and dichotomies of immigrant, postcolonial (un)belonging, that of displacement and uncertainty, remembering and forgetting. Despite the many 'dilemmas' his characters face in the pursuit for home, Maniam's message is clear, as Gabriel (2005) notes, "[Maniam's] works reject essentialist notions of national and ethnic identity for more processual and historically contextualized definitions" (p. 238). Achieving collectivism amidst alterities is a long, challenging road ahead but his works gesture towards embracing pluralism. Thus, the journey and vision towards self and national consciousness may be fraught with ambivalence, yet Maniam's approach remains one of inclusiveness. *The Cord* and *The Sandpit: Womensis* as plays, whether read as drama or staged as theater, evoke a rich blend of rhetoric that constantly questions and rejects

categories as well as prescribed definitions, revealing the porousness of this form and Maniam's works in aiding the postcolonial exercise of home and belonging.

The section on poetry in this volume further engages readers in the discourse of self and consciousness as these selected nine poems grapple with issues like otherness, loss, transience and yearning. Through a journey of introspection, the poem "Loneliness" offers a poignant revelation of self, considering the evocative and organic ways memory can engage forms of lived experiences, of "revelations of life" (p. 271). It renders insights into the fragility and haunted sense of being alone, yet also gaining a ubiquitous consciousness towards loneliness. "Transience" bears witness to the fleeting, often paradoxical confines of the everyday, the ebb and flow of life exposed to "anger, frustration, then just misery/ ... disaster the only landscape/ ... tectonic tensions/ ... the dying flames of the human face" (pp. 286-287). The subject-matter of his poetry presents an explosion of ideas, ranging from grim portrayals to longing and desire.

This selection certainly appreciates and celebrates Maniam's literary approaches. Short stories like "Ratnamuni" and "Haunting the Tiger" are hallmark pieces that continue the literary inheritance of Maniam's prose. His critical dialogue is coupled with delicate negotiations, as Maniam broaches complex subjects such as 'possessing' (land), which imbricate with other notions such as the restlessness of self. As Maniam discusses Muthu's desire for belonging in "Haunting the Tiger", he also implicitly suggests that the definitive is impossible when the approach is for spatial power. Maniam offers a valuable critical perspective on the process of belonging, which is not only daunting, but deepened in a climate of uncertainty and fear. Maniam's short stories renew dialogues that emerged in his novels with new vigor, exploring contestations of space and place with a diacritical resonance, conversations that continue more explicitly his aforementioned motifs.

Maniam's works have always been used in classrooms, be it in secondary or tertiary level. Since *The Return* (1981) and his other short stories have been part of many syllabi, this selection would offer early readers an excellent foundation to Maniam's works and Malaysian literature in English. However, to say that the collection in this book does justice to Maniam's works would be an over-simplification simply because of the magnitude of talent from this acclaimed local literary giant. It does however, provide a good, introductory framework to Maniam's works which demonstrate tensions, contradictions and multiplicities of living in Malaysia, in varying degrees of complexity. Indeed, his writing will live on, long after his passing.

An interesting connection can also be made between Maniam's works and our current Covid-19 context in Malaysia. As Maniam's works is an important representation of nationhood and solidarity, the Covid- 19 pandemic in Malaysia has shown us the importance of creating solidarity in trying times. The kitajagakita# hashtag as well as the various ways in which Malaysians have come together to help each other – seen in aid provided through the white flag campaign or food banks at shops and areas of residents are indeed a reminder that these “unprecedented circumstances have triggered many Malaysians to act according to what they think their fellow Malaysians need ... [ingraining] the sense of togetherness and patriotism towards collaborative efforts in fighting the pandemic as a nation” (Azizan, Ismail, & Qaiwer, 2020, p. 331). Thus, Maniam's literary inheritance rings true and provides relevance even during this pandemic.

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