UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

TRANSFORMING DIASPORA IN THE NOVELS OF MALAYSIAN WRITERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

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TRANSFORMING DIASPORA IN THE NOVELS OF MALAYSIAN
WRITERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

By

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Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

July 2007
DEDICATION

This dissertation is a special dedication to all the children in the family.
TRANSFORMING DIASPORA IN THE NOVELS OF MALAYSIAN WRITERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

By

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July 2007

Chairman : Noritah Omar, PhD

Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

Malaysian writers of Indian origin writing in English have carved a tradition of their own in the Malaysian literary realm. The Indian diaspora in Malaysian Literature in English plays a dual-role. One is the Indian writer who is part of the diaspora himself and the other is the Indian characters that they portray in their writings. Both roles are equally significant in the contribution towards the development of literature in English in Malaysia and in its depiction of the social, political, economical, spiritual and cultural life of the Indian in Malaysia. The surge of writings in English by Malaysian Indians this millennium inevitably documents the Indian experience in Malaysia and establishes the evolving status of the Indian as a citizen of
this land called home. Six novels by three Malaysian authors of Indian origin are used as a basis for texts analysis in this study of which five were published in the 21st century. The point of departure for this study is K.S.Maniam’s article “The New Diaspora”\(^1\) which calls for the ‘internationalization’ of Malaysian literature in English by writers of an up-coming community, The New Diaspora, for wider acceptance, greater recognition and broader and higher consumption globally. The diaspora is seen as a temporary transitional phase that is initially bound by ethnicity and eventually transforms and transcends ethnic, racial, regional and national boundaries to become global citizens. Taking on a socio-political approach to literary study, this study explores novels in English by Malaysian writers of Indian origin to locate the Indian diaspora, to identify the temporary transitional phase of the diaspora and to trace the transcendent transformation that supports ‘internationalization’ of communal literatures which consequently encourages and promotes global consumption.
TRANSFORMASI DIASPORA DALAM NOVEL-NOVEL OLEH PENULIS-PENULIS MALAYSIA KETURUNAN INDIA

Oleh

KARTHIYAINI DEVARAJOO

July 2007

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Penulis-penulis Malaysia keturunan India yang menulis dalam bahasa Inggeris telah mencatat tradisi tersendiri dalam alam kesusastraan Malaysia. Diaspora India dalam kesusastraan Malaysia memainkan dua peranan iaitu satu sebagai penulis keturunan India dan lagi satu sebagai watak India dalam penulisan mereka. Kedua-dua peranan yang dimainkan ini memberi signifikasi yang setara terhadap penyumbangan mereka kearah pembangunan kesusastraan dalam bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Ia juga memberi penggambaran kehidupan diaspora India dari segi sosial, politik, ekonomi, keagamaan dan kebudayaan di Malaysia. Terdapat peningkatan penerbitan oleh penulis-penulis keturunan India yang mendokumentasikan pengalaman India di Malaysia dan seterusnya menentukan status perubahan yang berterusan di kalangan orang-orang India sebagai warganegara Malaysia. Enam novel oleh tiga penulis
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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 6th July 2007 to conduct the final examination of Karthiyaini Devarajoo on her Degree of Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Transforming Diaspora in the Novels of Malaysian Writers of Indian Origin” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree.

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Date: 15 November 2007
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

__________________________________
KARTHIYAINI DEVARAJOO

Date: 17 December 2007
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<tr>
<td>GOPIO</td>
<td>Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSID</td>
<td>Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIO</td>
<td>People of Indian Origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRI</td>
<td>Non-Resident Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Permanent Resident Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSCO</td>
<td>International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMS</td>
<td>Federated Malayan States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INA</td>
<td>Indian National Army</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nation Education, Social and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>ICA</td>
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

As a Malaysian of Indian origin, a member of the Indian diaspora, I regularly confront the complexities of having multiple identities and loyalties. The geographic displacement of my ancestors has destabilised the construction of an identity to call my own. In this study I explore the social and political implications of being part of a diasporic community as reflected in literary works by Malaysian writers of Indian origin.

Background of Study

According to Bhabha in *Location of Culture*, the characteristics of a particular diaspora can change over time; they are temporal, transitional and translational (1994:224). Such transformation is evident in Malaysian writers of Indian origin where they display three phases in their writing: diaspora; citizen of the nation; citizen of the world. Judith T. Shuval (2000), Rose Professor of Sociology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem claims that such transformations are “in response to processes in the three relevant referents: the group itself, the host society and the homeland”. It is my contention that the three phases of transformation: diasporic; citizen of the nation; citizen of the world and then writing about
other minority communities in the world; has positively influenced “internationalisation”, which means gaining international recognition, of contemporary Malaysian novels in English by Malaysian writers of Indian origin.

This study first examines the characteristics commonly associated with diasporic communities around the world. It then explores contemporary novels in English to locate notions of a diaspora in their texts and to trace changes in the writers, their writing and their community in response to their new environment; an example of such a change is the integration of the writers’ cultures with the cultures in the hostland.

The phrase “writers of Indian origin” has been extensively used in various studies on Indian diasporic writers globally, particularly in the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe. However, in discussing the need for an appropriate term, the Malaysian Indian Writers Foundation reports in “Speaking in Tongues: The Kavyan Writers” that “[b]y the late 1990s, a handful of these new writers [referring to Malaysian Indian writers] had come to realise that something had to be done to identify themselves in the Malaysian literary scene as ‘Malaysian Indian writers’ and ‘Malaysian writers’ - not merely ‘Non-Malay writers’”. The ensuing soul-searching led to the formation of Yayasan Sasterawan Kaum India Malaysia (Malaysian Writers' Foundation).
Indian Writers Foundation), better known as Kavyan, and the production of "Sastera Kavyan" (Kavyan Writings).

The changes in a diasporic society are studied in various fields like sociology, anthropology, political science and literature. In carrying out such studies, one of the common strategies used by diasporists is through the tabulation of a set of characteristics of the diasporic community. Sudesh Mishra writes:

[a] common strategy among diasporists is to classify diasporic social formations by (1) identifying new structures of being (identity) of an uprooted ethnic collectivity as it oscillates between homeland (2) by the absent topos and hostland (the present topos), by tabulating a set of defining characteristics of this collectivity and (3) by alluding to some kind of departure manifested on the plane of consciousness, as reified in memory" (16)

Mishra further asserts that diasporists tend to draw on ‘cultural productions’ such as art, dance and literature, that are aesthetic and produced by such communities to back up their assertions (Mishra 16). Literary works as ‘cultural productions’ inform the readers of various ‘social formations’ or communities. Mishra’s observation supports the use of literary works as the basis for this study on diaspora, which endeavours to explore the disposition of the Indian community based on the literary works it produces.
The novels selected for this study, which are produced in the contact zone, as the result of the encounter between the diaspora and the hostland, are analysed to explore the authors' views, as members of the Indian diaspora, on the changes in the Indian community in Malaysia. According to Sigmund Freud, “an author’s chief motivation for writing any story is to gratify some secret desire, some forbidden wish that probably developed during the author's infancy and was immediately suppressed and dumped in the unconscious (Bressler 94). Thus an attempt is made in this study to explicate the authors’ views through the characters portrayed in their literary works to trace notions of a diaspora.

The point of departure for this study is K.S.Maniam’s article “The New Diaspora”1 which was presented at a conference in Australia in 1996. He explores the problems of ‘internationalising’ community literatures, that is making available community literatures in a “physical and touristy way”, using the multicultural situation in Malaysia as a sort of model to reflect a national identity. The term “internationalizing” is capable of several interpretations; Maniam means making the literature produced by Malaysian writers appeal to international audience.

Maniam is a Malaysian who pioneered writing in English and a literary critic of notable standing and recognition in the region. Referring to his
own writings Maniam asserts that he is “pushing the frontiers of conscious
ness away from a purely social, political and cultural centre … to heal the
fragmented self of man … to see man whole ….” (1996:x). As a Malaysian
writer of Indian origin, Maniam negotiates the creation of a national identity
while retaining his ethnic soul. In the above article he calls for the
‘internationalisation’ of Malaysian literatures in English by writers of a new
community, the New Diaspora whose writing reflect a multicultural and
multiracial Malaysian identity. Maniam’s view on Malaysians writing in
English will be further discussed in Chapter Two and Three.

Maniam calls for a multicultural depiction because he sees the quest for
cultural and racial purity as a “deadly risk” where he states that

[put within this larger framework, a country that supports
cultural purity and loyalty, directly or indirectly, may invite
certain risks. One deadly risk, as I see it, is the isolation that
a celebratory sense can bring to that culture and society.
And this isolation, in turn, causes a closing off of its borders
of awareness.

The possible risk is that the increased awareness and promotion of the
writers’ ethnic origin and the presence of notions of a diaspora in their
literary works might complicate the vision for the creation of a national
identity in Malaysian literature.