



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**TRANSFORMING DIASPORA IN THE NOVELS OF MALAYSIAN
WRITERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN**

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FBMK 2007 12



**TRANSFORMING DIASPORA IN THE NOVELS OF MALAYSIAN
WRITERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN**

By

KARTHIYAINI DEVARAJOO

**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.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2007

Chairman : Noritah Omar, PhD

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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.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**TRANSFORMASI DIASPORA DALAM NOVEL-NOVEL OLEH
PENULIS-PENULIS MALAYSIA KETURUNAN INDIA**

Oleh

KARTHIYAINI DEVARAJOO

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Pengerusi : Noritah Omar, PhD

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Penulis-penulis Malaysia keturunan India yang menulis dalam bahasa Inggeris telah mencatat tradisi tersendiri dalam alam kesusasteraan Malaysia. Diaspora India dalam kesusasteraan 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 signifikansi yang setara terhadap penyumbangan mereka kearah pembangunan kesusasteraan 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



Malaysia keturunan India di kaji untuk analisis tekstual dan lima dari novel ini diterbitkan dalam abad ini. Detik permulaan kajian ini adalah artikel K.S.Maniam bertajuk “The New Diaspora”ⁱ yang mendorong ‘internationalization’ kesusasteraan Malaysia dalam bahasa Inggeris oleh penulis-penulis komuniti baru yang di kenal sebagai ‘The New Diaspora’ untuk penerimaan yang meluas, pengenalan dan penggunaan yang meningkat dan bersebar di seluruh dunia. Diaspora dianggap sebagai satu fasa yang tidak kekal dan berubah-ubah dan ia di bendung pada mulanya oleh ethnisiti, kemudian ia berubah dan menjejak batasan ethnic, bangsa, kawasan dan negara untuk menjadi warganegara Malaysia dan seterusnya warga dunia. Dengan menggunakan kaedah sosio-politik, kajian ini meneliti novel-novel dalam bahasa Inggeris oleh penulis-penulis Malaysia keturunan India untuk menentukan diaspora India, mengenalpasti fasa diaspora yang tidak kekal dan berubah-ubah dan menjejak transformasi yang menyumbang terhadap ‘internationalization’ kesusasteraan komuniti yang seterusnya dapat memupuk dan mempromosikan novel-novel Malaysia pada peringkat antarabangsa.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not be if not for the love and patience of my husband Ashok and children Rabyin and Jannusha. My husband was the pillar of strength that kept the family going while I was coping with various commitments at work, at the university and at home. I will always be indebted to him for the freedom I enjoyed as a part-time student. My parents and siblings constantly directed gentle words of encouragement that flickered like a flame in the depth of my soul.

The supportive evaluation and precious time shared during the course of this study with my Supervisory committee: Chairperson Dr Noritah Omar and members Dr Washima Che Dan and Dr Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya; provided valuable insights into my own writing. Dr Noritah's sharp observations complemented Dr Washima's thought-provoking questions and Dr Wan's gentle words of caution to avoid pitfalls and suggestions to enhance my arguments, guided me through the evolving stages of writing up this dissertation.

Careful reading with comments and suggestions on the first three chapters by Jean Floyd, ELT Resource Consultant, English Language Teaching Centre Malaysia, led to interesting discussions that greatly contributed to the entire writing up of this dissertation.



My good friend Anne Freeman was always there for me during trying times and moments of despair. I thank her for all the drinks we have had together in the process of motivating me to stay on track. My colleague Kamariah Samsuddin is another friend who was ready to pull me out of the doldrums, especially during the last two years of my study. The advice and words of comfort and encouragement from all my colleagues at English Language Teaching Centre Malaysia, in one way or another, contributed to the successful completion of this dissertation.

Puan Salmiha Amin of the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia was a great support when it came to fulfilling the technical requirements for procedures each semester and in finally submitting this thesis.

To all the others whose names are not mentioned above, I truly appreciate your contribution in guiding and encouraging me throughout the course of this doctoral research.



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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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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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GOPIO	-	Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin
CSID	-	Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
PIO	-	People of Indian Origin
NRI	-	Non-Resident Indian
PRI	-	Permanent Resident Indian
ISSCO	-	International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas
FMS	-	Federated Malayan States
INA	-	Indian National Army
UNESCO	-	United Nation Education, Social and Cultural Organisation
ICA	-	Intangible Cultural Heritage



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

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 consciousness 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

[p]ut 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.