



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***RETHINKING IDENTITY THROUGH HINDU SPIRITUALITY
IN K.S MANIAM'S NOVELS***

MOHAMMAD EWAN BIN AWANG

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By

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

March 2016

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

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March 2016

Chair: Associate Prof. Noritah Haji Omar, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

In one of his essays, K.S Maniam, a Malaysian Literature in English author states that his literary works “attempt to bring the precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality” (“Fiction into Fact” 264). Despite his assertion, the role of Hindu spirituality in his works especially in relation to the Malaysian Indian identity construction remains little studied. Past studies tend to approach identity in Maniam’s works using the post-colonial theory and focus mainly on the politics of identity construction. Hitherto, the discussion of identity in Maniam’s works is limited to the political and sociological realms. Therefore, my thesis attempts to go beyond these realms by suggesting an alternative discourse of identity through spirituality. My central argument is that spirituality plays a significant role in identity construction in K.S Maniam’s novels. To address this, I employ Advaita Vedanta, an Indian philosophy as a theoretical framework in order to highlight an alternative rendering of identity in Maniam’s novels. Advaita Vedanta’s conception of identity rests on monistic and undifferentiated whole called *Atman* (True Self) which can only be achieved when a person transcends subject-object dichotomy. Advaita Vedanta’s accentuation of “non-duality” is revolutionary as it restructures the concepts relevant to identity such as one’s sense of selfhood, one’s relationship with the world, and one’s perception and experience of reality. I analyse all of Maniam’s novels which are *The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993), and *Between Lives* (2003) and show how his works reflect the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. Maniam incorporates this Indian philosophy into his works by means of literary motifs such as self-reflexivity, rites-of-passages, rituals, disruptions of temporal/spatial linearity, and mystical experiences. These motifs highlight how spirituality informs identity construction in Maniam’s novels. My thesis shows that spirituality in KS Maniam’s novels is transformative in three ways. Firstly, spirituality revolutionizes the way the characters perceive and comprehend the notion of “self” and “reality”. Secondly, spirituality depathologizes the characters’ existential crises. And thirdly, spirituality renews human relations as it emphasizes the importance of upholding moral and ethical duties, compassion, and empathy. To conclude this study, I reiterate that spirituality provides a more paradigmatic discourse of identity and at the same time allows K.S Maniam to articulate his creative and intellectual voice as a Malaysian Indian author.

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

**MEMIKIR SEMULA IDENTITI MELALUI KEROHANIAN HINDU
DALAM NOVEL –NOVEL K.S. MANIAM**

Oleh

MOHAMMAD EWAN BIN AWANG

Mac 2016

Pengerusi: Prof. Madya Noritah Haji Omar, PhD

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Dalam salah sebuah esainya, K.S Maniam, penulis sastera Malaysia dalam bahasa Inggeris, menyatakan bahawa karya sastera beliau “berusaha untuk membawa ketelitian bahasa Inggeris kepada sifat serba boleh dan kedalaman mitos dan kerohanian agama Hindu” (“attempt to bring the precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality” (*Fiction into Fact* 264). Walau bagaimanapun, di sebalik kenyataan K.S. Maniam ini, kajian-kajian ilmiah mengenai peranan kerohanian, khususnya dalam pembentukan identiti kaum India di Malaysia dalam karya-karya beliau ternyata masih kurang mendapat perhatian. Adalah jelas bahawa kajian-kajian ilmiah sedia ada lebih cenderung menggunakan pendekatan pascakolonial bagi menganalisis soal identiti, selain lebih tertumpu politik soal pembentukan identiti dalam karya-karya K.S. Maniam. Perbincangan mengenai identiti dalam karya-karya beliau juga rata-rata masih terbatas kepada ruang lingkup politik dan sosiologi. Justeru, kajian ini berusaha untuk melangkaui ruang lingkup tersebut dengan mencadangkan kerohanian sebagai pendekatan alternatif terhadap wacana identiti dalam karya-karya K.S. Maniam. Tesis ini tertegak di atas hujah bahawa kerohanian memainkan peranan yang signifikan dalam pembentukan identiti dalam karya-karya K.S. Maniam. Bagi menyokong hujah ini, falsafah India, Advaita Vedanta digunakan sebagai kerangka teoritikal. Falsafah Advaita Vedanta ini mengemukakan wacana identiti yang berbeza kerana konsep identiti Advaita Vedanta adalah bersandar kepada kesatuan diri, *Atman* yang dianggap hanya boleh dikecapi apabila seseorang itu mampu mengatasi dikotomi subjek-objek. Advaita Vedanta merevolusi dan menstruktur semula pemahaman berkaitan identiti, kekendirian, hubungan dengan alam, persepsi dan pengalaman manusia melalui konsep *non-duality*. Tesis ini menganalisis kesemua novel K.S. Maniam, iaitu *The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993), dan *Between Lives* (2003) guna memperlihatkan bagaimana novel-novel ini mencerminkan falsafah Advaita Vedanta. K.S Maniam menerapkan falsafah tersebut dalam novel-novel beliau dengan memanfaatkan motif-motif seperti refleksi diri, *rites-of-passages*, ritual, kekacauan garisan masa dan ruang, dan pengalaman mistik. Pemanfaatan motif-motif ini menjelaskan bahawa kerohanian memang mempengaruhi soal pembentukan identiti dalam karya-karya K.S. Maniam. Tesis ini juga mendapati bahawa kerohanian dalam novel-novel K.S. Maniam adalah bersifat transformatif, dan sifat ini diperlihatkan melalui tiga cara. Pertama, kerohanian mengubah cara watak

novel mengerti dan memahami maksud “kendiri” dan “realiti”. Kedua, kerohanian menjadi penawar kepada krisis eksistensial yang dihadapi oleh watak novel. Ketiga, kerohanian memperbaiki hubungan manusia kerana ianya menekankan tanggungjawab moral dan etika, belas kasihan, dan empati. Tesis ini berusaha untuk menjelaskan bahawa kerohanian telah menyediakan ruang untuk kehadiran satu wacana identiti yang lebih bersifat paradigmatic, dan pada masa yang sama memungkinkan K.S. Maniam untuk mengekspresikan daya kreatif dan intelektual beliau sebagai seorang penulis India di Malaysia.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Noritah Haji Omar, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, PhD

Professor
Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(Member)

BUJANG BIN KIM HUAT, PhD

Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:

Declaration by graduate student

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Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name and Matric No.: Mohammad Ewan Bin Awang (GS24947)

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- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) are adhered to.

Signature: _____

Name of
Chairman of
Supervisory

Committee: Noritah Haji Omar, PhD
Associate Professor

Signature: _____

Name of
Member of
Supervisory

Committee: Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani, PhD
Associate Professor

Signature: _____

Name of
Member of
Supervisory

Committee: Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, PhD
Professor

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Being of Malaysian Indian origin myself, it seems only natural that I write about my community. It is commonly accepted that a writer writes about what he knows best. (Maniam, "Fiction into Fact" 263)

The passage above captures K.S Maniam's personal reflection on the nature of his literary oeuvres. Arguably one of the most prominent and prolific Malaysian Literature in English writers, Maniam's literary works portray and explore complex issues surrounding the Malaysian Indian community such as identity, sense of belonging, culture, and religion. In one of his earliest essays, Maniam expresses his concern about the lack of a commonly supported picture of the Malaysian Indian society ("Fiction into Fact" 264). Maniam reiterates that his literary vocation is to "provide...more complex and integrated picture of the Malaysian Indian" (264). In so doing, Maniam states that Hinduism provides him the means to explore the Malaysian Indian psyche with greater depth, as he describes his literary oeuvre as an "attempt to bring the precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality" (264).

Scholars and critics alike have acknowledged the presence of Hinduism in his literary works. As Peter Wicks rightly observes, "light and darkness, the immanence of Hinduism, the density and naturalness of Hindu ritual" permeate through his works ("Diaspora and Identity" 9). However, the role of Hindu spirituality in his works, especially in relation to the Indian identity is frequently overlooked. Thus far, identity in Maniam's fiction is mainly approached using post-colonial theory. Among some of the primary post-colonial concepts used to analyze identity in Maniam's works are diaspora, ethnicity, hybridity, hegemony and subalternity. These concepts are employed by past scholars to show how Maniam challenges the stereotypical and static representation of Malaysian Indians and portrays instead a more fluid, contemporary and transformed Indian identity. However, these concepts often limit the discussion on identity in Maniam's works to the socio-political realm. As a result of this reductive scope of identity, spirituality in Maniam's works often occupies a peripheral position.

Therefore, my thesis examines the crucial role of spirituality in identity construction in K.S Maniam's novels. Using an Indian philosophy as a theoretical framework, I will demonstrate the transformative power of spirituality in providing a more paradigmatic discourse of identity. I maintain that spirituality provides an alternative avenue through

which one revisits and rethinks the concepts relevant to identity, such as sense of selfhood, one's relationship with the world, and perception and experience of reality.

Subramaniam Krishnan Maniam, or K.S Maniam (1942-) is of Tamil-Hindu working class background, born in Bedong, Kedah, Malaysia. Maniam is a descendant of a South Indian grandmother. The latter emigrated under the indenture/kangany labour recruitment system under the British rule circa 1916 (Wicks, "Malaysia as Myth" 2). He is often hailed as one of Malaysian Literature in English canonical writers who produces "some of the best works...spanning almost the entire history of the tradition, which began only in the early 1950s" (Quayum, "Self Refashioning" 28). In 2000, Maniam became the inaugural recipient of the Raja Rao Award in New Delhi for his contribution to the Literature of the South Asian diaspora. This is followed by the 2003 Malaysian Library Book Award. Maniam's novel *The Return* was chosen as a secondary education literature text. His works are also widely read in many Australian universities. Indeed, his achievements as a Malaysian writer consolidate his position as one of the most eminent and emblematic voices of Malaysian Literature in English.

Spirituality and identity are indeed inseparable in Maniam's works of fiction. Maniam has frequently intimated the transformative potentiality of spirituality in relation to one's identity and sense of selfhood. In one of his earliest interviews, he expresses that his literary endeavour is "to see the destructuring so that man can get to be himself [...] I don't see why human beings should serve out their lives in this materialistic sense" (Greet 6). Although Maniam does not renounce materialism altogether, Maniam's concern is that it may encumber "the true value of the self" (Raihanah 58). According to Maniam, Indian philosophy and spirituality thus proffer a form of solution to experience what he believes to be "the death of the self - the falling away of a personality as it has been known - and being replaced by a paradigmatic self that is capable of encompassing more" (Kee 4).

Maniam also proposes the need to rethink identity from a standpoint that transcends material, socio-economic, and corporeal attachments. This is further validated when Maniam says, "I want to see the universe in man...that is the opposite of seeing man in the universe" (Kee 16). Maniam's view echoes a famous Hindu saying, which is "I am not one of the world, but the world is in my consciousness" (Maharaj, *The Ultimate Medicine* 36). Already inherent in this statement is a revision of understanding the nature of one's identity and his or her relationship with the world. Maniam's statement is indeed a reflection of a classic and integral Hindu negation of duality. According to Hinduism, duality is a hindrance to a more inclusive and liberated view of selfhood and identity. The inward turn, as Maniam suggests, requires an epistemic shift that is aimed to unravel "the mystical experience of the larger personality that resides within us" (qtd. in Quayum and Wicks 265). Thus, Hindu spirituality advocates an alternative paradigm in viewing and interpreting the nature of identity in Maniam's oeuvres.

The "inward turn" as Maniam suggests foregrounds the crucial role of self-reflexivity which can be deemed as a necessary step for spiritual insight. The adage "know thyself" is a commonly held virtue for all spiritual and religious movements across time and space. The practice of self-reflexivity requires a person to engage critically with

his or her core values, thoughts, behaviours, stereotypes, and/or prejudices. Self-reflexivity may provide fruitful outcomes such as self-renewal, rehabilitation and acquisition of greater knowledge of oneself and the world. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin states about self-reflexivity:

The being who is the object of his own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon himself, becomes in a flash able to raise himself into a new sphere. This describes the awakening of one's sense "to know", but it is not merely to "know", but to establish a center from which one can know that one knows. (qtd. in Duane 6)

De Chardin highlights what may potentially be the rightful beginning for self-transformation. In many spiritual traditions, knowledge of who we are and how we relate to the world is often emphasized. The ultimate aim of this knowledge is a renewed and more concrete understanding about human identity.

In Hindu spiritual tradition, the self-reflexive practice often involves a critical reassessment of "self" and "reality". According to Hindu spirituality, our identification with the "personality" – the body, mind, and sense complex – produces a false sense of selfhood. Erroneous self-conception occurs when a person equates his or her identity with what he or she has or/and lacks. Consequently, this reductive scope of identity tends to cause sufferings (*samsara*) as a person believes he or she is inherently inadequate and limited. This creates feelings of disease, distress, and discomfort. However, ignorance (*avidya*) often compels a person to seek a sense of wholeness in the external world. Instead of restoring feelings of peace and happiness, the search creates a perpetual cycle of desire. The only way to break free from this cycle is by gaining spiritual wisdom about the true nature of identity. According to Hinduism, *Atman* (True Self) is not subjected to the reductive scope of man's psychophysical processes. *Atman* is "fullness and freedom from limitations of all kinds as well as its nature as the basis and source of all joy" (Rambachan, "Human Nature and Destiny" 20). To realize this True Self, a necessary epistemic shift of identity is required which includes the dismantling of our limited sense of self, thus, what Maniam calls "the death of 'personality'" (Kee 14).

This Hindu philosophy of the self is very well reflected in Maniam's literary works. In his works, 'materialism' often denotes preoccupation with the corporeal self and the many attempts to attach superficial and symbolic inscriptions to this self. These include the notions of class, socio-economic and education status. Maniam does not reject materialism altogether. His concern is that materialism may create a false "persona" or "sense of self" which proves to be more detrimental to the character's psyche. As Peter Wicks notes, Maniam's works have a particular propensity to "turn from worldly success to spiritual enlightenment, though not...as a reclusive form of escapism" (Wicks, "Diaspora and Identity" 14). More importantly, through spirituality, one could harness the wisdom to transcend superficial and materialistic attachments. Consequently, one could experience and recover the true value of the self. In order to achieve these effects, Maniam employs the motifs of self-introspection, philosophical dialogue, magical-spiritual excursions, rituals and rites-of-passage. Through these

motifs, Maniam essentially creates a nuanced spiritual tone in his works which could be better comprehended through the lens of Hindu philosophy and spirituality.

Maniam's use of Hinduism gives us an insight into his optimism in religion and its role in everyday life. Maniam's optimism is crucial as it implicitly promotes the transformative capacity of spirituality in providing the Indian community a sense of agency. In studying the role of Hinduism for the Malaysian Indian community, Andrew Willford, for instance, observes that "in a political system which is defined by ethnic criteria, cultural and religious expressions (i.e. Hinduism) have become the sole avenue for the expression of group aspirations" (247). However, it must be borne in mind that the recourse to religion should not be seen purely as a response to external factors such as politics. As Alexandra Kent duly notes, religion "goes beyond the matters of authority... (It) has not only to do with ideology and community, but is also deeply personal" (4). Indeed, Maniam's focus on the inner self denotes a revitalized conviction on the possibility of identity realization that transcends racial, ethnic, and political boundaries. Maniam portrays the characters' existential crises as a symptom of their struggle for enlightenment on the true nature of self and reality. Hinduism therefore provides the vehicle for Maniam to capture his vision of a more liberating and paradigmatic discourse of identity.

With Hindu philosophy and spirituality, Maniam opens up an alternative discourse of identity which rests primarily on Indian epistemology and soteriology. This requires a reorientation from what is predominantly a Western conception of identity applied to Maniam's works to that espoused by Hinduism. Although Western theories have long discussed the role of spirituality in identity, it is often perceived as a 'part' of the human's identity and treated in an "either-or" binary logic (e.g. the Cartesian dualism of body vs mind). On the other hand, Hinduism treats spirituality as the sum of all identities. Therefore, by studying the role of Hinduism in Maniam's works, my thesis is deconstructive in intent, in that it circumvents the predominantly Western binary logic and follows the Hinduism concept of non-duality (oneness) of Self (*Atman*). This reorientation would also denote that human experiences such as happiness, sufferings, alienation, or anxiety are re-addressed through the perspective of Hinduism. I argue that by foregrounding Hinduism in Maniam's works, we are able to see how Maniam asserts his unique identity and voice as a Malaysian Indian author.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Throughout the course of my research, I have identified three main research problems. Firstly, while identity in K.S Maniam's works remains a pivotal research area, it is rarely approached using a religious or spiritual perspective. Some of the most current and dominant approaches to identity in K.S Maniam's works include ethnicity (Ariffin 1-8; Pillai and Subramaniam 133-47), diaspora (Gabriel, "Re-Theorizing Diaspora" 341-57; Wicks, "Diaspora and Identity" 115-27), multiculturalism (Raihanah 43-63; Quayum, "Self Refashioning" 27-46), and psychoanalysis (Lim, *The Infinite Longing* 123-207). These theoretical lenses are used to highlight mainly the issues surrounding the politics of identity construction in K.S Maniam's works. These include hegemony, self-empowerment and articulation, subjectivity of identity, and marginalization of the

Indian community. Past studies on Maniam's works are connected by a common concern to propose an alternative rendering of the Indian identity that is more fluid and dynamic. However, the role of spirituality (especially Hinduism in Maniam's fiction) in contributing to the dynamics of the Indian identity has not received sufficient attention. More often than not, spirituality occupies a peripheral position in past discussions.

Thus far, only Shivani Sivagurunathan and Andrew Ng have analyzed Maniam's works using Hinduism. Sivagurunathan focuses on Maniam's *In a Far Country* and uses the Vedantic philosophy to explore motifs of time, space, and light and how these motifs are connected to the Indian-Hindu identity. She suggests that "spiritual assessment is necessary before the country is able to move forward and allow for a sincere, fertile co-existence, of all its communities" (89). Similarly, Ng explores "the extent to which sacred works of Hinduism inform Maniam's narratives, and...help us appreciate Maniam's stories better" (106-7). Both Sivagurunathan and Ng employ an eclectic mix of Western and Eastern theories to ground their discussion of religion in Maniam's fiction. Therefore, neither Sivagurunathan nor Ng approaches all of Maniam's novels using the Vedantic philosophy as a consistent trajectory to analyze its relationship with identity. Their works are illuminating insofar that they explore an alternative paradigm (religion) and how it produces a fresher insight into Maniam's literary works. However, they do not discuss in depth the potential transformative capabilities of religion and spirituality in producing a more viable sense of identity.

My study follows the need for an alternative paradigm of identity by engaging critically with the heart of Hinduism which is its spiritual system and philosophy. My study argues that religion not only provides the alternative discourse of identity, but also facilitates the process of spiritual self-realization. In doing so, I use a main Hindu philosophy, Advaita Vedanta which espouses the non-dual nature of man and reality. In this thesis, I would argue and demonstrate how Maniam consistently adheres to this Hindu philosophy to offer a more all-encompassing sense of identity to his characters.

Secondly, critics of Maniam's works argue that the recourse to religion and spiritual system may breed further ethnocentrism and parochialism. Shirley Lim, Maniam's contemporary writer and critic, states that religious themes in K.S Maniam's works are "to some extent a turning away from nationality to identity" by choosing to "retreat into their separate selves" (132). Lim views this as Maniam's strategy to avoid from confronting the more direct and contentious matters of racial polarization in Malaysia. Furthermore, Lim comments on the ethnically and culturally homogenous make up of Maniam's works. In her analysis of Maniam's novel *The Return*, Lim states "an unknowledgeable reader may well believe Malaysia to be, even if pluralistic, an Indian-dominant nation, or at least not a Malay dominant country" (132). Tang Soo Ping, another critic, asserts similar sentiment, stating that Maniam's novel, *The Return* as "so inward looking" that it disregards "the larger multi-racial society outside" (278). Tang deems Maniam's works as "exploratory" as it is "yet unable to encompass that wider perspective that may be achieved with age and experience" (283).

These criticisms are reasonable insofar that they push for a more inclusive and trans-cultural construction of the Malaysian identity. In fact, in his own essays and

interviews, Maniam continuously urges for literary works to be more dynamic and to transcend communal and racial prejudices. As Maniam states, “in a multi-racial society such as ours in Malaysia, it is not feasible or safe to encourage communal isolation and development” (“Fiction into Fact” 265). However, Maniam is equally aware of the importance of one’s unique religious or spiritual identity. In relation to this, Maniam consistently argues that his decision to focus on the Indian community is not to “merely exploit the community’s domicile in Malaysia, its history, and problems purely for the sake of promoting a communal outlook”, but rather an attempt to present “universalised picture of man and society in conflict” (264). As Raihanah Mohd Mydin notes:

Many of (Maniam’s) characters take a particular journey, akin to a hero’s quest towards self-discovery, and each returns in some form or other, better aware and perhaps better prepared to continue their lives. As a consequence, even though the characters may have Indian names and the plots use the Malaysian Indian social and cultural milieu, the conflicts that they face are not altogether foreign to Malaysians regardless of their culture and racial backgrounds. (58-9)

Raihanah Mohd Mydin highlights an important feature of Maniam’s works which my thesis would further explore, which is the archetypal motif of the ‘hero journey’. In Maniam’s novels, the journey is not only physical and mental, but also spiritual. The ‘inward turn’ in all of Maniam’s novels provides an insight into his characters’ spiritual journeys as they strive to rehabilitate their sense of selfhood and experience spiritual transcendence.

My thesis will further explore Maniam’s aspiration to portray what he believes to be the “universal man” (*Haunting the Tiger* xxi) and argue that spirituality provides the avenue for a more inclusive construction of identity. In Maniam’s novels, the existential crisis is often portrayed as a form of spiritual experience. The spiritual tenor of his fiction frequently evokes timeless wisdom about the nature of identity, one that is often shared across different religions and culture. For instance, Maniam’s novels raise the issues of one’s moral and ethical beliefs and behaviour, duty and responsibility to self and others, empathy and compassion towards others, and the need to revitalise meaningful human relationships. These are some of the proofs that religious values often transcend racial, ethnic, and political boundaries. I argue that spiritual openness not only allows individual self-realization, but also potentially facilitates social transformation.

Finally, critics of Maniam’s works argue that the recourse to religion exacerbates the Indian community’s alienation and marginalisation. In their estimation, Maniam’s characters’ adherence to Hinduism symbolically evokes nostalgic longing for the past. In other words, characters attempt to reconnect with the lost mother land, “India” through religious adherence. It is the characters’ subservience to religious ideals that prevents them from adjusting to the new land (Malaysia).

According to some scholars and critics, religious characters in Maniam's novels such as Periathai and Naina in *The Return* and Sellamma in *Between Lives* represent tragic fixtures who are unable to accommodate themselves in the new land, Malaysia. Their adherence to religious and spiritual teachings cause disillusionment, steering them away from the immediate and practical reality (Quayum, "Self-Refashioning" 38-9). Critics are also of the view that the Indian characters who rely on religion as a source of identity and sense of belonging are "condemned to repeat...some elusive rootedness" (Lim, *The Infinite Longing* 124) which could be traced in their sense of nostalgia, disenchantment, and alienation. Peter Wicks notes:

beyond the personal landscapes, the prospects of South Indian diaspora are indeed bleak. Maniam's fiction conveys a profound, haunted sense of cultural loss, and of never having arrived at a secular alternative. ("Parameters of Malaysian Identity" 16)

Scholars neglect to appreciate Hinduism in Maniam's fiction beyond the outward representation of the religion. Hinduism in Maniam's works is not limited to the surface references of the religion as he also engages with its esoteric spiritual teaching and wisdom. This is well validated as Hindu spirituality also informs his narrative strategies. The recurring motifs of time and space, for instance, are used by Maniam to interrogate the nature of human identity. Maniam's incorporation of these motifs into his novels is indeed in line with the emphasis given by Hinduism. According to Hinduism, True Self is realized when a person is liberated from the boundaries of time and space. Advaita Vedanta teaches the importance of acknowledging the truth about self and reality. Hindu philosophy espouses the true nature of self (*Atman*) and reality (*Brahman*) as eternal and complete. This also denotes a modification in how one understands the concept of time and space.

According to Hinduism, *Atman* and *Brahman* are not subjected to time and space as these elements belong to *maya* or phenomenal world. Time and space cause sufferings to human. Practice of detachment from the phenomenal world of time and space is crucial in order to realize one's *Atman* (True Self) and experience *moksha* (true liberation). These three key elements of Hindu teachings on true self: of oneness, wholeness, and timelessness are embodied by the spiritually enlightened characters in Maniam's novels such as Periathai (*The Return*), Sivasurian (*In a Far Country*), and Sellamma (*Between Lives*). These characters attest that the recourse to spirituality is not an endeavour to recapture the lost sense of time and space. Rather, it is a source of transformation to liberate oneself from being attached to time and space. At the same time, the recourse to religion grants agency to Maniam's characters to rise above their pathologies of loss, alienation, and anxiety. Thus, spirituality provides them the ultimate liberatory discourse of identity.

In describing Periathai in *the Return*, Maniam views her as the "source of intellectual, emotional and particularly spiritual development" who represents the "spiritual strength and vision of a people" ("Fiction into Fact" 267). Due to her (Periathai's) "accommodative openness" (267), Maniam adds that her presence is important to other characters who would come to her in "times of distress and for guidance" (267). As

Maniam states, “it is my hope that Periathai comes to inhabit the mind of those who read my fiction as a complex source of wisdom within themselves” (267). Clearly for Maniam, Periathai is a timeless archetype of wisdom; a source of enlightenment to other characters in his novels. In this thesis, I argue the importance of spiritual enlightenment to the protagonists who face existential crisis. Notions of “alienation”, “displacement” and “marginalisation” are revised to suggest that their crises are symptomatic of spiritual struggle caused by their misidentification with the mind-body-sense complex and the phenomenal reality. I show how Hinduism becomes the source of depathology for the characters to overcome their fragmented sense of self.

To encapsulate my arguments, by using Indian philosophy to analyze Maniam’s works, we are able to discover an alternative and critical discourse of identity which hitherto remained little explored. Spirituality gives Maniam’s characters a sense of agency and consequently facilitates their self-realization. Thus, religion or spirituality is not an obsolete approach to identity. It actually embraces the aspiration of many scholars who are wont to portray the Indian community as progressive and enlightened. It is not an uncritical adoption of religion, but rather a conscious decision “to choose only those aspects that can be effectively merged into the lifestyle he adopts in the new land” (Maniam, “The New Diaspora”). Thus, my thesis suggests for a rethinking of identity through spirituality as a way to capture a more dynamic view of the Indian identity, especially as envisaged by Maniam in his novels.

1.3 Scope of the Study

The main focus of this study is the role of spirituality in the construction of identity in Maniam’s novels. My thesis argues that spirituality provides a more paradigmatic and liberating discourse of identity. Accordingly, the notion of identity is revised according to the Indian philosophy of non-duality which essentially espouses the oneness of self and Absolute Reality (*Atman* is *Brahman*). I will explore and demonstrate how this philosophy is consistently reflected in Maniam’s novels. In order to highlight how spirituality is incorporated into his novels, I focus on frequently used motifs such as self-introspection, excursion, rituals, passage of rites, disruptions of spatial-temporal linearity, and mystical experiences. I connect the significance of these motifs with the characters’ identities. Along the way, I argue that spirituality depathologizes the characters’ existential crises. I will also focus on the role of spirituality in facilitating the renewal of human relationships.

This thesis focuses on his three novels *The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993), and *Between Lives* (2003) which are replete with religious and spiritual overtones. These novels capture Maniam’s philosophical and aesthetical outlook as a writer. Throughout this thesis, I employ Advaita Vedanta, a primary Indian school of thought which stresses on “non-duality” and at the same time:

prioritizes that salvation or *moksha* is attainable through the discernment between Absolute Reality, which is essentially divine where the self realizes

that it is the greatest source of things, *Brahman*, and non-reality which is of this world. (Sivagurunathan 80)

In order to understand “moksha”, I will connect it with related notions in Hinduism such as *Atman* (True Self), *Brahman* (Absolute Reality), *maya* (phenomenal reality), *dharma* (ethics and duty), *samsara* (sufferings) and *karma* (rightful deed). *Moksha* in this thesis is not just an eschatological (final event of history or end of time) liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. But more importantly, *moksha* should be understood in a psychological and human developmental way, that is, liberation from ignorance to a state of enlightenment and self-realization.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

Maniam is considered as one of the most prolific writers of Malaysian Literature in English. His works include four collections of short stories (*Plot, The Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories, Arriving and Other Stories, Haunting The Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia, The Loved Flaw: Stories from Malaysia*), two plays (*The Cord and Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and Plays*), and three novels (*The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993), and *Between Lives* (2003)). This study, however, will be limited to the scrutiny of his novels. This decision is made based on three reasons.

Firstly, his novels capture an almost comprehensive vista of his literary works. All the elements which have been explored and experimented in his short stories and plays—especially the recurring motifs of the mystical and spiritual, the quest for spiritual wisdom and transcendence, and the inevitable tug-of-war between materialism and spirituality—are more sophisticatedly articulated in his novels.

Secondly, Maniam has gestured that his novels provide a better canvas to illustrate his idea, starting from his first novel when he says, “it is really in the novel, *The Return*, that the fictional proportions of personalities and events become extended and integrated” (“Fiction into Fact” 266). Furthermore, Hindu philosophy is better enunciated in his novels as he says, “the other aspect borne out by those six short stories was that they had gone deep into the Indian psyche and social consciousness that the novel, *The Return*, was to extend five years later” (Maniam, “The New Diaspora”).

Thirdly, his novels explore the complexity and dynamism of Hindu spirituality in a progressive manner. *The Return* sets the foundation for Indian philosophy, while *In a Far Country* resumes what is left unresolved in the first novel and *Between Lives* acts as the closure or denouement of Maniam’s exploration. Read as a trilogy, one would be able to trace the development of Maniam’s thought and creative engagement with Indian philosophy. As my analytical chapters would further demonstrate, Maniam gradually increases the diversity of characters from different cultural backgrounds. This diversity is crucial as it reflects Maniam endeavour to portray a more inclusive

rendering of Malaysia. With the change of character dynamics, the spiritual nuance in his works also becomes increasingly challenging, complex and insightful. What remains consistent is Maniam's optimism in the role of spirituality to facilitate a better sense of selfhood and more meaningful social relations.

In terms of theoretical choice, I have chosen the main Indian school of thought, Advaita Vedanta. There are two other Vedanta schools of thought which are the Visistadvaita Vedanta (qualified non-dualism) and Dvaita Vedanta (dualism). Advaita is the oldest extend sub-school of Vedanta, followed by Visistadvaita and Dvaita respectively. The three Vedantic philosophy share the same epistemological basis of *Brahman*. As Raghavendrachar summarizes:

The three *acarya* (Advaita, Visistadvaita and Dvaita) start from the same point. Their standpoint is *Upanisadic*. With the *Upanisadic* they all agree that Brahman is the ground of all. They all agree that the world is only a derived reality. They all agree that the essence of all is Brahman Itself, and the world is not apart from Brahman. They all accept that the everything in the world points to Brahman as its ground. For all, from the standpoint of Brahman, the world is in some sense or other less real than Brahman. (10)

However, the latter two schools of thought (Visistadvaita and Dvaita) offer extensions to the cosmological views of *Brahman-Atman*. Advaita lays the crucial foundation that there is no such distinctions between *Brahman* and *Atman* therefore implying that multiplicities in the world is an illusion. The pathway to realizing *Atman* (True Self) is to undo erroneous identification with the physical and material world (*maya*) because *Brahman* is permanent and not subject to permutations and changes.

To this view, Visistadvaita adds that while *Brahman* is the ultimate reality, we must not totally disregard the multiplicities of creation. The variety of experiences, objects and perceptions are real (though they are not as real as *Brahman*) since they are tangible. But according to Visistadvaita, what is permanent in all these multiplicities is *Brahman* alone. It is with *jnana* (self-knowledge) that we can distinguish the true nature of *Brahman* from the physical existence of multiplicities in this world (Raghavendrachar 23).

The Dvaita school of thought proffers a dualistic approach to the nature of *Brahman* and *Atman*. However, as Indian philosophers and scholars have noted, the term "dualism" in Hinduism cannot be literally understood using the Western framework. This is clearly exemplified by Dvaita Vedanta as it propounds that the oneness of *Brahman* and *Atman* is not to be mistaken as a literal union between God and man. Here Dvaita sheds additional light on the cosmogony of *Brahman* in that *Brahman* is the all-divine and inclusive creator of the universe and his essence, *Atman* (True Self) exists in creations. We must acknowledge the physical and corporeal existence of ourselves – it is through this body that we perform everyday duties and activities. Therefore, a *Brahman-Atman* union through spiritual enlightenment is not as though humans attain the qualities of *Brahman* since the former is created by the latter. Rather,

it is acknowledgement of the existence of *Brahman* in everything. As Raghavendracher further notes, “*Brahman* according to *Dvaita* is a metaphor of all-pervading oneness” (34). The dualism of *Dvaita* lies in its careful analysis of the often misunderstood union of *Brahman-Atman* as a physical probability and emphasis on the union and rediscovery of the *Brahman* soul in human beings. In short, the differences of the three Indian schools of thought lie in the degree of cosmological explications of *Brahman*. However, it is very clear that they share the same epistemological basis of reality, that is *Brahman* is the reality while phenomenal world (physical and corporeal reality) is impermanent and mutable. Therefore, *Visistadvaita* and *Dvaita* add to the already well established proposition of reality by *Advaita* which inadvertently consolidate *Advaita* as the main contributor to the Indian and Vedantic philosophy. This justifies my decision to focus on the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* in this thesis. As Eliot Deutsch explains:

Advaita has been and continues to be, the most widely accepted system of thought among philosophers...and it is, we believe, one of the greatest philosophical achievements to be found in the East, or in the West. (3)

Since my thesis uses Indian philosophy as a theoretical framework, the notion of identity, including related terms such as “self”, “world”, and “reality” would adhere to the Indian philosophy’s definition and interpretation. I make a conscious choice not to use any other theory to aid my thesis, especially Western theories of identity, in order to retain and respect the ingenuity of the Indian worldview. At the same time, using an Indian philosophy allows me to further interpret Maniam’s novels from an Eastern point of view. By doing this, I greatly reduce the possible incompatibility in defining ‘identity’ throughout this research. It must be duly noted that the West has variegated definitions of identity which are different from the Indian’s conception of non-dual identity. Thus, I will not exhaust any comparison between the Western and Eastern definitions of identity. I will consistently use *Advaita Vedanta* to provide the definition of terms throughout this thesis.

Finally, the history and socio-politics of the Malaysian Indian identity and community in this thesis are discussed insofar that they reflect the main context of this thesis, which is Maniam’s literary works. Therefore, I would not exhaust any discussions on Malaysian socio-historical or political discourse as one of the main intentions of this thesis is to suggest spirituality as an avenue that transcends the parameters of politics, ideology, and history. I hope to demonstrate how spirituality often evades restricted political, cultural, or racial boundaries. Consequently, I argue that spirituality is the avenue that would better capture Maniam’s vision of a “universal man”.

1.5 Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions.

1. How does Hindu spirituality provide a paradigmatic discourse of the Indian identity?

2. How is the Indian philosophy Advaita Vedanta manifested in K.S Maniam's novels?
3. How and why does Hindu spirituality play a transformative role in the Indian identity?

1.6 Research Objectives

The general objective of this thesis is to explore identity construction through spirituality in K.S Maniam's novels. The specific objectives of my study on Maniam's novels are as follows

- (i) To examine the significance of Hindu spirituality in providing a more paradigmatic discourse of the Indian identity;
- (ii) To explain the tenets of Indian philosophy (Advaita Vedanta) as manifested in Maniam's novels;
- (iii) To investigate Maniam's literary strategy to incorporate Hindu spirituality in his works;
- (iv) To demonstrate the transformative role of Hindu spirituality to the Indian identity.

It should be noted that these objectives are interrelated especially in the following analytical chapters of the thesis (Chapter Three, Four and Five).

1.7 Significance of the Study

The main significance of this thesis lies in its exploration of spirituality as a viable paradigm to produce a more refined and liberating identity. It is significant in its employment of Indian philosophy to analyse Maniam's novels. To date, there is no study that uses the Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta as the sole and consistent theoretical framework to approach his works. My approach reinvigorates the discourse of spirituality by accentuating its positive and transformative capabilities in generating a more cohesive sense of self. Advaita Vedanta, the Indian school of thought which stresses on the "oneness" of self and the world restructures the way one perceives identity and his or her relationship with the world. Spirituality therefore requires a rethinking and rerouting of one's habitual thought and behaviour. It is this revolutionary prospect of spirituality that allows me to highlight Maniam's optimism in the transformative role of religion and spirituality in human identity. Relatedly, with Indian philosophy, my thesis foregrounds a unique Indian/Asian paradigm of identity. My thesis uncovers an epistemological and soteriological uniqueness of Indian philosophy which expounds the "oneness" of identity (*Atman* is indeed *Brahman*). In this way, I am able to explore the means through which Maniam could assert his intellectual and creative voice as well as his identity as a Malaysian Indian author.

1.8 Conceptual Theory

1.8.1 Overview

This section of the study further discusses the theoretical angle I use to navigate the analysis of K.S Maniam's novels. I focus on a particular strand of Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta which places a premium on the concept of non-duality. In so doing, my discussion of this Indian school of thought would revolve primarily around its aim to enable human beings to solve the existential problems of life, transcend human limitations thus going beyond suffering, and attain a more refined sense of selfhood and identity. The main view of Advaita Vedanta's non-duality is that there is no real differentiation within the self; the non-duality of all matters comes from and resides within *Brahman*, the ultimate cause of the universe and the ultimate Reality.

Since Advaita Vedanta covers a broad cosmological view, I only focus on its perspective on human identity. Therefore, I will cover one major concern of Advaita Vedanta that is how to realize *Atman* (True Self). In realizing *Atman*, it is important to understand the root cause of human suffering. *Atman* is real liberation (*moksha*), while human suffering is perceived as a state of bondage (*samsara*). Since the Vedantic tradition holds that *Atman* (True Self) is *Brahman* (Absolute Reality), I discuss how this knowledge is often impeded by human misidentification with *maya* (phenomenal world). My thesis also explores the crucial role of *dharma* (moral and ethical duty) to oneself and others in attaining *moksha* (liberation) and realizing *Atman* (True Self). Along the way, I also discuss attendant notions such as *avidya* (self-ignorance) and *jnana* (self-knowledge).

My rationale to use Advaita Vedanta as my theory in this thesis is based on Maniam's own emphasis on the self as a trajectory of identity construction. As Maniam articulates, "I want to see how many personalities can be contained in one self. I want to see the universe in man. I want to see the world in a broader sense. [...] I know it sounds like a lofty idea but the feeling is very down-to earth. I feel it very strongly" (Kee 16). Raihanah Mohd Mydin rightly points out that "Maniam admits the issue of self has a special place in his writing...he also admits to be keen on discovering the true value of the self" (58). Indeed, as a child, Maniam has already developed an early interest with the concept of "self" (Maniam, "In Search of a Centre"). In one of his essays, Maniam indicates his interest in Hindu spirituality and its relationship with the human psyche when he contemplates that "*Atman* is the individualized soul of the universe *Brahman*?" ("In Search of a Centre"). He further extends this inquiry on the nature of human reality and identity in his second novel, *In a Far Country*. In this novel, he employs Sivasurian, a spiritually enlightened character, to pose similar questions about the nature of self and reality when he says, "Soul? *Atman*? *Brahman*? (Words stand for things: they are not the things themselves. How can they hold within themselves invisible qualities?)" (*In a Far Country* 104). In order to understand Maniam's vision of self, one must recover the centrality of *Atman* and *Brahman* in Hindu philosophy. Advaita Vedanta, therefore, is most suited for this purpose.

Throughout this thesis, I will consistently use the Vedantic definitions of identity and related concepts such as self and reality. Discussion on self-realization or self-transformation throughout this thesis will also adhere to Vedantic philosophy.

1.8.2 Background of Advaita Vedanta

Advaita is a part of the Indian school or philosophy known as Vedanta. Advaita means “not-two” or “non-dual”, while Vedanta means “end of the Vedas”. It is a reference to the Hindu *Upanishads* positioned at the final section of Indian scriptural texts known as the Vedas. *Upanishads* are sections of Vedic writing devoted to expounding the nature of reality. Vedanta, in a broader sense, refers to the vast body of Indian philosophical discourse and spiritual teachings.

The non-dual experiential philosophy of Advaita Vedanta has a dominant position in Indian thought which is primarily espoused by Samkara, the Advaita Vedanta great master, circa 7th to 8th century. In describing Samkara’s contribution to Indian philosophy, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an Indian philosopher states:

It is impossible to read Samkara’s writings...without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality...Samkara stands out as a heroic figure of the first rank in the somewhat motley crowd of the religious thinkers of medieval India. (446)

My thesis will not depend on Samkara’s exegesis since the original text has been translated with flourishing commentaries by other philosophers and Vedantic spiritual teachers. I emphasize the essential foundation of the Advaita Vedanta’s school of thought which is its non-dual teaching. Advaita Vedanta’s approach towards existential and spiritual experience is best described as ‘deconstructive’. Leesa Davis explains:

(Advaita Vedanta)...shifts the questioner away from dualistic perceptions of the world and dichotomous ways of thinking. In other words, practice instructions and teachings that serve to deconstruct or experientially ‘undo’ our ‘erroneous’ fragmented perception of reality and experientially disclose reality (*Brahman*) to the seeker as Advaita claims it to be: devoid of any real distinctions, not constituted by parts, and in essence, not different from the self (*Atman*). (18)

At the heart of the Vedantic conception of self is *Atman*. *Atman* refers to the pure, undifferentiated consciousness that “underlies and support the individual human person” (Deutsch 48). *Atman* is “timeless and spaceless, and cannot be an object of thought” (Deutsch 48). In Advaita, it is further stated that *Atman* (True Self) is none other than *Brahman* (Absolute Reality) (Deutsch 48).

Since *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical, the discovery of True Self is achieved by dismantling illusionary ideas of differentiated and fragmented identity (e.g. I am “this” or I am “that”). Since non-duality is the heart of Advaita Vedanta’s philosophy, thinking about the “self” necessarily replicates the subject-object dualism: the thinker (subject) and the object contemplated by the thinker (object). This dualism, Advaita proposes, causes humans to live in perpetual ignorance about the nature of self through the distinction of the thinking “I” and the search of *Atman* (True Self) who cannot be the object of thought. Advaita Vedanta expounds on intuitive realization, a direct “nowness” and “oneness” of experience (Deutsch 13). Advaita Vedanta’s approach to identity is deconstructive in intent because it revises the divide between the thinker and the thought. Hence, its non-dual approach restores the importance of direct experience and intuition.

Ken Wilbur, a contemporary exponent of nonduality states that the absence of a temporal characteristic (‘undifferentiated’, ‘timeless’, ‘spaceless’) in the non-dual self is an “intensely intimate experience which is so close to us that it slips through the net of words” (Wilbur 14). Wilbur suggests that while it is possible to talk about what consciousness and the self are like, we cannot fully describe what they are as the experience goes beyond words. This is the realm of spirituality, a direct experience of everything “as it is” which makes Advaita Vedanta not only a philosophical system but also “a practical guide to spiritual experience” (Deutsch 4).

1.8.3 Advaita Vedanta and Non-Duality: From Bondage to Liberation

Advaita Vedanta proposes that humans live in perpetual ignorance about the nature of self. Suffering occurs when we falsely identify ourselves with the limited mind-body-sense complex. This state of ignorance or *avidya* is caused by the mind’s creation of distinction between subject and object, or knower and known. Advaita Vedanta suggests that one may perceive such distinctions or differentiations, but actually, no such distinctions exist (Potter 6). This identification leads us to believe that we are separate and lack a basic sense of wholeness. With this ignorance, we are propelled naturally on a journey of false pursuits by seeking experiences, objects, and situations that we deem would give us the sense of completeness. Liberation from human suffering therefore can only come from removing this ignorance through the direct awareness of pure consciousness (Potter 6).

David Loy points out that our use of dualistic thinking creates an experience of the world that is itself dualistic (202). The world is experienced as a collection of objects interacting in space and time and as a result, we too are one of those objects. Chandrarhar Sharma states that “like knowledge, ignorance too implies a reference to the subject and the object. The subject in whom ignorance resides is the person in illusion, and the object to which it refers is the object of misapprehended” (175). In relation to this, Loy points out that in the absence of differentiation between subject and object, a new sense of self conjures, “a sense of self that has no distinct, objective identity” (Loy 202). This is the realm of *Atman* (True Self), “the pure undifferentiated consciousness that underlies and supports the individual human person” (Deutsch 48).

Atman is timeless and spaceless and cannot be the object of thought (Deutsch 50). It is the essence of an individual and extends beyond worldly phenomena. Within the Vedantic tradition, one begins with individual consciousness, passes on to universal consciousness and finally arrives at pure consciousness. Throughout these processes, there is no differentiation between subject and object (Deutsch 48). Though it appears like a journey or developmental path, *Atman* (True Self) is always present at all times throughout this period. *Atman* is deemed to be none other than *Brahman* (Absolute Reality) (Deutsch 48). These two terms – *Atman* is *Brahman*, *Brahman* is *Atman* – are used in the Vedantic teaching to describe the absence of a subject-object existence and point to the unity of consciousness and being.

The term *Brahman* appeared for the first time in the ancient Indian text Rig Veda, then in the *Brahmanas*, and after that in the *Upanishads*. It is generally defined as “the unitary principle of all being” (Deutsch 9). However, this beingness cannot be described or characterized. In fact, *Brahman* is best described as *neti- neti* which means “not-this not-this” in Hindu tradition (Potter 9). Understanding *Brahman* therefore only comes through the negation of all dualistic thinking.

Brahman is considered divine but it should not be viewed as personifying God. Rather, *Brahman* has an all-inclusive, omnipresent attribute. Within the non-dual Vedantic teaching, *Brahman* is described as:

a name for that fullness of being which is the content of non-dualistic spiritual experience: an experience in which the distinctions between subject and object are shattered and in which remains only a pure, unqualified (absolute, all encompassing) oneness. (Deutsch 13).

According to the Vedanta, a person is interested to study the teachings because he/she suffers from *samsara* or bondage - which has its roots in self-ignorance. The teachings are hoped to provide the person ultimate solutions to his or her confusion and suffering. This confusion can come in the form of existential questions, such as "who am I? What is reality?"

Self-ignorance refers to the false conclusions that humans make about the specific nature of the Self, causing humans to mistakenly identify with the limited mind and body. According to Chandraraj Sharma, ignorance is not merely caused by the absence of knowledge, but also due to wrong knowledge about the self and the world (Sharma 171). Ignorance rises from this non-comprehension and mis-identification like a screen where the wrong knowledge is getting in the way of the truth (Sharma 175).

According to the Vedanta, an individual in the state of bondage is bound up with the process of ego-identification. This process labels the Self with the “I”-thought patterns, consequently attaching the person’s thoughts to other aspects, such as his attributes and experience in everyday life. The continuous, habitual and non-critical adoption of this ego-identification results in a dependency to define and affirm one’s identity based on

his or her “thoughts”, e.g. “I am this, I am that”. This ego-identification, according to Vedantic philosophy, is ‘superimposition’. Karl H. Potter explains:

In particular, says Samkara, we are prone to superimpose the properties of the object of awareness on its subject, and vice versa. That is, we identify ourself qua seat of consciousness with ourself qua body, mind, memory, etc., all of which are objects, not subjects, and so have at least one property that the self qua subject cannot have. It is this primary superimposition that constitutes ignorance (*avidya*). (69)

It is this mis-identification with the “I” thought patterns that causes a person to live in a state of duality all the time. One becomes so identified with the mind-body-sense complex. According to Vedanta, this is the state of bondage. A person who lives in a state of bondage suffers from the emotional pains of fear, anxiety, grief, sorrow and anger. Negative emotions arise as a direct result of one’s identification with the mind-body-sense-complex. For example, “I am a man” or “I am a woman” comes from the identification with the biological sex of the physical body. Within this limitation of the mind-body-sense-complex, there is a mental construction of the perceived disparity between the two: “man/woman”, therefore ingraining a sense of “I am lacking”. Due to this identification, one feels one is incomplete. This is what Samkara describes as identifying “ourselves with the qualities of our limited gross and subtle bodies and superimpose upon the true self the characteristics of these” (qtd. in Rambachan, “Human Nature” 20). From a psychological standpoint, this belief creates negative self-image and low self-worth. One would feel inadequate and inherently flawed. Such a limited scope of selfhood affects not only a sense of who one is but also dictates a person’s overall sense of mental-emotional health and well-being.

Another form of bondage is the feeling of separateness. Akin to the feeling of inadequacy, this is caused by one’s misidentification with the physical body. When a person is identified with the body, one would assume he or she is separated from all the other objects beyond the parameter of the physical body. The belief engenders feelings of isolation, loneliness and abandonment, since one cannot recover the gulf between his body and objects beyond the body. According to Vedanta, even in the best of circumstances (physically, materially, and socially), as long as the person is living in the state of bondage, he or she will suffer from a basic sense of separateness and isolation as an individual, causing various degrees of existential fear and emotional suffering (Dayananda, *Freedom from Fear* 1).

Advaita Vedanta provides a solution to this problem through self-knowledge. Self-knowledge denotes a realization or insight that a person recognizes the self as being full, complete and not lacking. This is the pathway to *moksha* or liberation. Liberation is freedom from bondage, a stated goal of the spiritual aspirant in Advaita Vedanta. This insight brings a renewed understanding of who one is. A real liberation is not just from the limited body-mind-sense complex, but also liberation from *maya*.

Maya (phenomenal reality) becomes the canvas of our ignorance. *Maya* is the limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled. *Maya* is often held to be an 'illusion', a veiling of *Brahman* (Absolute Reality). Since *Brahman* is the only truth, *maya* is true but not the ultimate truth. This is because *Brahman* is permanent while *maya* is contingent upon spatiality and temporality. Thus, *maya* is not to be understood as false, but rather as a material projection of *Brahman*. Advaita Vedanta posits that *maya* functions to veil *Brahman* and obscure it from our consciousness. Advaita Vedanta uses "the serpent and the rope" metaphor to portray *maya*, where the rope is mistaken for the snake in the darkness. Just as this illusion gets destroyed when true knowledge of the rope is perceived, similarly, *maya* gets destroyed when humans perceive *Brahman* by gaining Self-knowledge. The liberation from *maya* is indeed liberation from being subjugated to time and space. Radakrishnan states:

Space, time and cause, which are the forms of all experience, are not ultimates. The real is obscured by them. If we get beyond the distinction of places, moments, and events, it is said, the world of diversity will collapse into a single unit. Experience cast in the moulds of space, time, and cause is phenomenal only. The real is what is present in all times. It is that which ever was, is, and will be. The real cannot be present today and absent tomorrow...When insight into reality is gained, the world of experience is transcended. (562)

Radakrishnan highlights a crucial point about the phenomenal world (*maya*) and the true nature of *Brahman*. Human sufferings, due to ignorance or misidentification with the body-mind-sense complex, are often exacerbated by misidentification with space, time and experience. The inherent "lack" that we experience is not only caused by the pervading feeling of "incompleteness". Even with time and effort, one could never achieve the sense of "completeness". The core issue is the basic paradigm of self. This explains why humans invest a lot of endeavours for a sense of completion through aesthetic and sensual enjoyments (*kama*) and worldly success (*artha*), only to find a continuous and vicious cycle of lack and desire (Rambachan, "Human Nature" 12). While Hinduism permits the pursuit of *kama* and *artha* in one's life, Hinduism frequently emphasizes the limitations of these two elements. As Rambachan further notes, "the gains of pleasure and worldly success are transient, leaving us hopelessly addicted to their momentary gratifications" (13).

According to Vedanta, liberation (*moksha*) takes place through the process of gaining Self-knowledge or *Jnana* (Deutsch 102; Paranjpe 212). The heart of self-realization according to Advaita Vedanta is indeed an epistemological shift through the acquisition of *jnana*. Since ignorance (*avidya*) is the root cause of suffering (*samsara*), gaining the correct knowledge (*jnana*) of self is the resolution in order to remove ignorance (Potter 69). When the identity of an individual begins to take root in the Self, it has a profoundly positive effect on the person's psyche. The nature of Self is inherently whole, benign, stable, and free from the limitations of any kind. A process of transformative healing for the person begins to unfold once a person recognizes the true nature of Self and subsequently reorients oneself in attaining this knowledge (Dayananda, *Freedom from Fear* 33).

When a person gains true knowledge, a restructuring of identity begins to take place. The core belief is that I am *Atman* (True Self), acknowledging one's sense of wholeness, completeness, and fullness. It requires a radical shift from identifying oneself with a basic sense of lack, inadequacy, and incompleteness to one of being whole and complete. When the Self is recognized to be the true nature of the individual, the mind, too, undergoes a major process of transformation. The mind ceases to think in duality (the thinker and the thought) and directly identifies with the Self as one entity, vanquishing the superimposition of *maya* (phenomenal reality) and the limited body-mind-complex. According to Advaita Vedanta, *Atman* (True Self) is omnipresent and ever-pervading. Therefore, gaining this self-knowledge facilitates a new insight into reality and self as limitless, whole, unchanging, and inherently at peace.

When the realization of *Atman* takes place, a person will experience wholeness (*ananda*), which is “a positive experience beyond pleasure and pain” (Paranjpe 243). He or she redeems the basic sense of positivity, self-worth, and self-acceptance. Gaining the knowledge of *Atman* and *Brahman* will deconstruct the way one perceives the idea of time and space as the experience of True Self liberates oneself from the chains of *maya* and the body-mind-sense complex. Due to the knowledge of the limitless nature of Self, he or she is relieved from the fear of death (Sankaracarya and Gambhirananda 176). The person has differentiated his or her physical self from the True Self, as the former is transient while the latter is permanent. The two ‘self’ are related yet fundamentally exist in different realities. *Atman* exists outside the realm of birth and death and will continue to endure despite the death of the physical body. As captured in a verse from *Katha Upanishads*:

One becomes freed from the jaws of death by knowing That *Atman* (Self) which is soundless, touchless, colourless, undiminishing, and also tasteless, eternal, odourless, without beginning and without end...and ever constant. (qtd. in Sankaracarya and Gambhirananda 176)

Self-realization through knowledge (*jnana*) also changes the perspective of a person in relation to his or her worldly desires. Since *Atman* is eternal and wholesome, it is not subjected to worldly permutations and changes. Therefore, the realization of *Atman* requires no external pursuit. A person becomes more mindful and aware about ‘desires’ as these desires will never bestow eternal completeness. This is not to suggest that the realization of *Atman* is a complete disengagement from the world. Rather, it means a state of *vairagya* or dispassion for the world and worldly desires (Hiriyanna 76).

Since attaining knowledge of True Self and Reality obliterates any form of binary opposition or duality, a person recognizes that his or her own nature is also the nature of all beings in the creation. This horizontal camaraderie of “oneness” would prompt the person to naturally want to treat others with the same love, respect, and care as they treat themselves. One would observe, promote, and maintain peacefulness and harmony in oneself and with others. This is the principle that dictates the *dharmic* order. The basic principle of *dharma* is “do to others what you wish others to do to you, and do not do to others as you do not want others to do to you” (Tejomayananda 29; Ten Dam

322). To live a moral or *dharmic* life is to live in such a way that treats everyone and everything as equal and as one. Swami Satprakashanda says that:

Basically, morality is the attunement of the individual self to the Self of the universe. While a spiritual person practices this knowingly, a moral man practices the same unknowingly. Moral life is the closest to the spiritual life. Unselfishness is the prime moral virtue. It is the attunement of the individual self to the Self of the universe, the Soul of all souls. (42)

The immediate effect when a person chooses the dharmic action is a feeling of emotional well-being, wholeness, and peace of mind. Additionally, dharmic action activates a sense of empathy and compassion towards others. Alternatively, choosing an action that goes against the dharmic order creates an immediate sense of agitation, disharmony, and fragmentation in the mind (Tejomayananda 29). Indeed, while realizing *Atman* (True Self) is the pinnacle of Vedantic philosophy, it would be impossible to achieve without observing moral and ethical conducts and duties. As an excerpt from *Katha Upanisad* suggests:

One who has not abstained from evil conduct, whose sense are not controlled and whose mind is not concentrated and calm cannot gain the Self through knowledge. (qtd. in Sankaracarya and Gambhirananda 158)

Jnana (self-knowledge) catalyses the fundamental transformation in the psyche of a person. The person shifts from identifying with the mind-body-sense-complex to an identity rooted in *Atman*. This transformative process generates a positive impact on a person's overall psychological and emotional health.

The Advaita Vedanta's philosophy of non-duality and the deliverance from *samsara* (bondage) to *moksha* (liberation) are crucial stratagems that can be used by individuals to construct a more refined sense of identity. Advaita Vedanta critically addresses the roots and solutions of identity crisis by asking a person to re-examine his or her identification with the body-mind-sense complex and *maya* (the phenomenal world). Its deconstructive technique towards identity is especially illuminating because it aims to dismantle humans' habitual and uncritical ways of thinking, experiencing, and relating to the world. For instance, Advaita Vedanta cautions a person not to rationalize or intellectualize *Atman* (True Self) because *Atman* cannot be conceived as an object of thought. Instead, the person must seek it through experience and intuition. What this deconstructive approach to identity underscores is that human experience of reality is phenomenological, and that the concepts of reality are socio-culturally determined mental constructs. It is my belief that K.S Maniam uses this non-dual approach to deconstruct received ideas and ideologies mistaken for absolute reality by society. As Paniker puts it, "all Indian art is imbued with this esemplastic imagination which helps one to see the world upside down, realising that the very notion of up and down in an absolute sense is absurd" (10).

Maniam's novels are replete with literary motifs that are aimed to deconstruct binary oppositions such as journey, rites-of-passage, and rituals. All these motifs are used to open up a discourse of self-transformation; one that can be better appreciated and understood from the perspective of Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta.

1.9 Definition of Terms

Some of the terms used in this thesis require a proper defining parameter as to reflect the aims, objectives, and course of the thesis. For the sake of precision and convenience, most of the terms are defined based on the Indian-Hindu worldview and philosophy so as to reduce ambiguities surrounding the terms or concepts. Some of the recurring terms throughout the thesis are as follows:

1.9.1 Identity

Identity is generally understood as a sense of self that is interlocked, intertwined, and theorised in terms of its relationship with gender, language, culture, religion, politics, race etc. It may encompass an individual identity and beyond as one is tied to the identity of a group, culture, etc., thus the terms cultural identity, political identity, gender identity etc. In this thesis, identity is used interchangeably with the term self. This is because within the Indian thought, identity is mainly understood as a "purely spiritual idea" reflected in the emphasis of "True Self" (*Atman*) as the only real and highest form of human identity (Abraham 4). Identity in this context is understood in psycho-spiritual terms, which is different from the Western idea of identity as understood in psycho-physical terms (4).

1.9.2 Spirituality

In general, spirituality denotes a personal transformation according to religious ideals or/and subjective experience of psychological growth. The latter is often associated with separation from religious formalism and authority (Saucier and Skrzypinska 1259). In the context of this thesis, spirituality should be understood within the ambit of Hinduism. Hinduism may not subscribe to any particular theology or religious authority, but it is still considered as a religion with its own spiritual system. Within the Hindu thought, spirituality concerns individual experiences towards enlightenment. This enlightenment is *moksha* or liberation, a complete awareness of *Atman* (True Self) and *Brahman* (Absolute Reality).

Since Hindu spirituality focuses on the attainment of *Atman* (True Self), spirituality in this thesis is best understood as the sum of all parts of the human identity. This is a contrast to the Western idea of spirituality where it is treated as one of the many facets of human identity, e.g. spiritual identity. Additionally, spirituality in this thesis should also be understood as an alternative realm through which the concepts of "self", "identity", and "reality" are revised. For instance, since Hinduism treats identity as

mainly spiritual (*Atman*), we have to revise the notions of one's identification with the body-mind-sense complex (see 1.8.5 below) and phenomenal reality (see 1.9.6 below).

1.9.3 *Brahman* (Ultimate/Absolute Reality)

Brahman is understood in Hindu thought as the Ultimate/Absolute Reality. Ultimate reality is "different from the phenomenal, the spatial, the temporal and the sensible" (Radakrishnan 534). It also transcends "the opposition of permanence and change, whole and part, relative and absolute, finite and infinite, which are all based on the oppositions of experience" (536). It is eternal, sentient, and all-pervading because it is unrelated to time and space. In the context of this thesis, *Brahman* is understood as none other than True Self (*Atman*). There is no difference, according to Hinduism, between *Atman* and *Brahman* because they are self-luminous.

1.9.4 *Atman* (True Self)

Atman or True Self is a state of "I am" without the attachments to psychophysical processes (e.g. I am a man (body-mind)). It is not subjected to birth and death, change or incompleteness (Rambachan, "Human Nature" 20). Since *Atman* is *Brahman*, *Atman* has the same non-dual qualities. It transcends binary oppositions and is beyond the body-mind-sense complex and phenomenal reality. The best way to describe *Atman* is the Sanskrit expression *sat-cit-ananda* (reality-awareness-joy). Since *Atman* is free from limitations, it is identical with Absolute Reality (*sat*). *Atman* is "awareness" (*cit*) since it is the Self-as-knower, the true experiencer and witness of reality without any attachment to changes, permutations, and the body-mind-sense complex. And finally, *Atman* is "joy" (*ananda*) as it is a complete liberation from the reductive scope of the psycho-physical sense of selfhood and the limiting scope of *maya* (phenomenal reality). Therefore, True Self is not subjected to desire and lack because it is complete and whole.

1.9.5 Body-mind-sense complex

Body-mind-sense complex is a term I employ in this thesis to denote the limited parameter of how a person perceives his or her identity to be. According to John A. Grimes, "the body-mind-sense complex seemingly limits the infinite (*Atman*), just as a pot seemingly limits the infinite space" (71). In Advaita Vedanta, attachment to the body, mind, and sense limits our identity and often gives rise to a sense of lacking. For instance, attaching oneself with the thought "I am this, I am that" gives rise to an inherent sense of incompleteness since the other side of it is "I am not this, or I am not that". This dichotomy of this-that, I-you, us-them, and subject-object comes from identifying with the body-mind-sense complex. In Hindu thought, this is a state of "bondage" or suffering (*samsara*) as one feels inherently 'lacking' and 'incomplete'. In this thesis, the body-mind-sense complex is also referred to as "ego-identification". Ego in this context is to be understood as a "product of misconstrual" (Paranjpe 169). Ego impedes a person from attaining the enlightenment on who one is and is not. With

ego, one cannot differentiate between reality and illusion or freedom and limitation. For instance, an ego-identification with the body denotes a state of misconstrued identification with the body as the ‘true identity’ when in fact, the body, according to Hindu thought, is reductive and limited. Paranjpe explains:

The standard Advaitic examples of illusion are mistaking a rope for a snake, where the dangerousness of the snake is mistakenly attributed to a harmless rope, or mistaking a pillar for a man, where the human properties of life and motion are superimposed on an inanimate pillar. Similarly, the *Atman*, which is unchanging and always blissful, appears to be continually changing, now happy then sad, clear or confused and so on, *due to the superimposition of the attributes of ego onto it.* (170, italics mine)

1.9.6 *Maya* (Phenomenal Reality)

Maya is the realm of reality which we perceive and experience with our body, mind, and sense. But as the term ‘phenomena’ suggests, *maya* is continuously changing, impermanent, and transient. Within this realm, one often perceives his or her sense of self in relation to impermanent biological-physical-psychosocial processes such as birth and death, health and ailment, socio-economic status, etc. *Maya* also creates the illusions of multiplicities and variations. It is responsible in giving rise to a sense of “otherness” and “differentiation”. Humans erroneously construct a sense of selfhood when *maya* or phenomenal reality is wrongly perceived as the truth or reality. Identification with the body-mind-sense complex (see 1.9.5 as the above) is tantamount to the identification with *maya* or phenomenal reality. The phenomenal reality—just like human identity based on the body-mind-sense complex—is indeed limited. It causes humans to be trapped in the bondage of sufferings (*samsara*).

1.9.7 *Moksha* (Liberation/Emancipation)

In this thesis, *moksha* is not understood as merely an attainment of immortal existence. More precisely, *moksha* is understood as the gain of self-knowledge, since the core problem of identity is ignorance (Rambachan, “Human Nature” 21). With spiritual knowledge, the limited scope of the body-mind-sense complex (see 1.9.5 as the above) and phenomenal reality (see 1.9.6 as the above) is transcended. This process includes a restructuring of ‘self’ and ‘reality’ according to *Brahman* (Ultimate Reality) and *Atman* (True Self). Only by gaining the right knowledge can one liberate oneself from the chains of sufferings (*samsara*) caused by misidentification with the body-mind-sense complex and *maya* (phenomenal reality).

1.9.8 *Samsara* (Bondage/Suffering)

Samsara is a state of bondage or suffering that is perpetual when one is without self-knowledge (the knowledge of *Atman*). *Samsara* arises when one identifies with the

body-mind-sense complex and lives in a misconstrued reality (e.g. mistaking *maya* as *Brahman*). Since it is a state of suffering, one will experience mental and emotional pain. In a state of *samsara*, one tends to feel inadequate, incomplete, and unfulfilled. This is because one feels “lacking” as he or she feels separated as an individual identity in a world of duality. Some psychical sufferings include fear and anxiety.

1.9.9 De-pathology

Depathology is a term used in this thesis to express the removal of suffering. Since pathology denotes “suffering” or “sickness” or “ailment”, de-pathology is necessarily the opposite: an elimination of suffering, sickness, or ailment. Depathology is a common psychological term to express means or ways to alleviate pain or suffering and consequently improve mental/psychical health. I extend this notion in this thesis by arguing that spirituality is the avenue or means through which one could alleviate “suffering”. Suffering in this context is aligned with the Hindu thought *samsara* caused by misperceptions of self and reality. This misperception causes some existential “sufferings” reflected in a person’s feeling of alienation, loss, anxiety etc. “Depathology” in this thesis signifies the capacity of spirituality to facilitate self-realization of *Atman* (True Self). This would mean that spirituality facilitates a person to transcend beyond the pain and suffering from *samsara* (bondage/suffering) to *moksha* (liberation/emancipation).

1.9.10 Self-realization

Self-realization is a process and journey towards attaining the spiritual wisdom of *Atman* (True Self) and *Brahman* (Absolute Reality). A self-realized person embraces the understanding of non-duality of self-reality whereas a person who has yet to realize his or her *Atman* (True Self) remains in the state of *samsara* (bondage). In Maniam’s novels, the journey to self-realization takes many paths, such as self-reflexivity, rites-of-passage, rituals, mystical experiences etc. Self-realization would also be used interchangeably with self-transformation. The latter denotes a process of “restructuring” one’s identity or sense of self through spirituality from a state of *samsara* to *moksha*. One undergoes a process of self-transformation through spirituality in order to realize *Atman*.

1.9.11 Paradigmatic Identity

In this thesis, a ‘paradigmatic’ identity refers to an ‘ideal’ identity. An ideal identity according to Advaita Vedanta is *Atman* which is non-dual in nature. And since *Atman* is non-dual and is the highest form of identity, a paradigmatic identity overarches other elements often associated with identity such as gender, race, culture, politics, ideology etc. Throughout my study, recurring expressions such as “spirituality provides a paradigmatic discourse of identity” or “achieving a paradigmatic identity” are used in line with the concept of “True Self” that transcends the body-mind-sense complex. “Paradigmatic” identity is used interchangeably with “liberating”, “inclusive” or “all-

encompassing” identity which equally reflects *Atman* as an overarching and highest expression of identity.

1.9.12 Non-duality

Non-duality is a state of complete annihilation of the binary subject-object position. According to Advaita Vedanta, non-duality is a state of wholeness signified by *Atman* and *Brahman*. Duality arises when one erroneously engages with the subject-object, self-world, self-other, or us-them binary oppositions. According to Hindu thought, this dual mind set is the cause of *samsara* (suffering) as it denotes fragmentation, differences, otherness, and lacking. In order to realize *Atman*, one must dismantle the subject-object duality through self-knowledge. Some practices such as ‘mindfulness’, ‘meditation’ and ‘reflection’ would facilitate the experience of non-duality.

1.10 Methodology

This thesis is divided into five steps. The first step is to identify the research area. I choose to focus on the notion of identity in K.S Maniam’s works. My primary aim is to establish the essential role of spirituality and its connection with identity construction in Maniam’s works.

The next step is to review previous literature on Maniam’s works which give special attention to identity construction. Based on my findings (and as discussed in 1.1 Background of the Study and 1.2 Statement of the Problem), religion and spirituality (specifically Hinduism) are not given sufficient and due attention by past studies. Therefore, I set the niche of my study with three main arguments. Firstly, spirituality in Maniam’s novels facilitates a more paradigmatic and liberating discourse of identity. Secondly, spirituality depathologizes the characters’ existential crises. Thirdly, spirituality in Maniam’s novels promotes the renewal and rehabilitation of human relations.

Thirdly, I employ Advaita Vedanta, an Indian school of thought that emphasizes “non-duality”. My choice coincides with Maniam’s recurring literary motifs that suggest the disruption of binary logic in order to facilitate spiritual realization. Advaita Vedanta’s espousal of oneness of *Atman* and *Brahman* is found consistent in Maniam’s novels. I explore the attendant concepts that are vital to Advaita Vedanta and in Maniam’s novels such as *moksha*, *samsara*, *avidya*, *dharma*, and *maya*.

The fourth step is to perform textual analysis using Advaita Vedanta. I focus on all of Maniam’s novels: *The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993) and *Between Lives* (2003). I choose to focus only on his novels since they give a comprehensive vista of his literary aspiration especially in terms of the significance of Hinduism in the construction of identity. The textual analysis will focus on recurring motifs found in all novels such as existential crisis, self-introspection, philosophical dialogues, the

ontological-spiritual journey, rituals, rites-of-passage, and mystical experiences to highlight the spiritual nuance of the texts. My literary analysis will attempt to explore how spirituality opens up an alternative discourse of identity construction which is more engaging and all-encompassing.

Finally, I conclude the thesis by recapitulating the research problems and research findings and discussing the contributions of this study. My contributions to the present body of knowledge on K.S Maniam's fiction and Malaysian Literature in English are as follows. Firstly, my thesis explores the dimension of spirituality in Maniam's novels which hitherto remained little studied. Secondly, using Indian philosophy as a guiding theoretical framework, my thesis opens up an alternative discourse of identity in Maniam's works. Thirdly, my thesis resituates religion and spirituality back to the fore of literary discussion on K.S Maniam's fiction. And finally, I argue that my thesis explores a unique Indian and Asian paradigm of identity entrenched in the Indian philosophy of 'self' and 'reality'. Indian philosophy allows me to demonstrate how Maniam could assert his literary voice and identity as a Malaysian Indian author.

1.11 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One (this chapter) introduces and summarises the study. Chapter Two presents the Literature Review. Chapter Three, Four, and Five present the textual analysis of Maniam's novels, and Chapter Six concludes the study. The following sections present the summary of contents of the chapters.

1.11.1 Chapter One: Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the topic and provides the general outline of the theoretical background of the present study. It also establishes the research objectives and determines the area, scope, focus and emphasis of the study. The main aim of the thesis is to explore the significant role of spirituality in identity construction in K.S Maniam's novels. I employ an Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta, which expounds the non-duality of self (*Atman*) and Absolute Reality (*Brahman*). I argue that spirituality in Maniam's novels is transformative in three ways. Firstly, spirituality restructures and revolutionizes the way the characters perceive and comprehend the notion of "self" and "reality". Secondly, spirituality depathologizes the characters' existential or identity crises. And finally, spirituality facilitates a renewal of human relations.

1.11.2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

The second chapter, the literature review, would contextualise the present study within the body of related studies but in greater detail. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is to explore the critical reception of K.S Maniam's works. The second section functions as a "gap-identification" as I explore how identity in K.S Maniam novels has been approached by past studies. I argue that there is a perceived

need to explore the role of spirituality in Maniam's novels. Therefore, in the third section of the chapter, I further explore my conceptual framework, Advaita Vedanta, and discuss how Maniam's works incorporate this Indian philosophy into his novels. Finally, I reiterate the significance of approaching Maniam's fiction through the lens of spirituality.

1.11.3 Chapter Three: Journey towards *moksha* in *The Return*

The third chapter is the textual analytical chapter of Maniam's first novel, *The Return* (1982). Firstly, I address the *bildungsroman* structure of the novel which revolves around Ravi's (the protagonist) coming-of-age narrative, whose self-development and identity are complicated by two spheres of his life: the Indian milieu and the English culture. I discuss how the clash between these two environments causes Ravi's identity crisis. I discuss Ravi's misidentification with his body-mind-sense complex and the effects of this misidentification to his sense of selfhood and his relationship with his family. Finally, I show how Ravi indicates "the return" to and the realization of Hindu spirituality and culture when he eventually engages in self-reflection towards the end of the novel.

I also study the non-dual concept as embodied by the ascetic character Periathai who functions as the novel's spiritual archetype. I discuss Periathai's spiritual wisdom as indicated by her rejection of corporeal clinging. Her spiritual knowledge gives her an alternative sense of agency as she secures her position within the realm of *Brahman*. And finally, I study Kannan (Ravi's father) and his journey towards *moksha* (liberation). I discuss the significance of Kannan's spiritual endeavour as he tries to dismantle his identification from *maya* and consequently destroy the illusion of duality in order to claim his ultimate liberation in *Brahman*.

1.11.4 Chapter Four: Spiritual Interrogation of Time, Place and Memory in *In a Far Country*

This chapter focuses on K.S Maniam's second novel, *In a Far Country*. In this chapter, I analyse the protagonist's (Rajan's) existential crisis and how he tries to surmount it. I discuss Rajan's misidentification with the phenomenal world which causes his existential crisis. The analysis uncovers his erroneous perception of self and reality, misunderstanding of *karma* and his moral crisis. I also explore the importance of Hindu moral order (*dharma*) and its relationship with identity. I discuss Rajan's hedonistic and unrestrained lifestyle which complicates his existential crisis as reflected in his inability to engage in meaningful relationships with other characters. I show how Rajan initiates the process of reclaiming his true self by realizing that *Atman* (True Self) and *Brahman* (Absolute Reality) are non-dual and that one must banish the illusions of time and place, phenomenal reality, desires, and pleasures. In elucidating this aspect of the novel, I discuss Rajan's relationship with Sivasurian. The latter embodies the novel's spiritually enlightened character.

Next, I discuss Rajan's relationship with a Malay character, Zulkifli in order to show the former's challenging process of putting spiritual knowledge into practice. I explore

the journey motif of the novel (both physical and allegorical) to demonstrate how the motif disrupts the subject-object duality and deconstructs the normative boundaries of time and space to engender an alternative experience of self (*Atman*). I argue that this excursion allows Rajan to gain insight into *Atman* and *Brahman*. The spiritual journey teaches him the limitations of his ego-identified self. Consequently, Rajan realizes the importance of reinstating *dharma* (moral order) in his life to facilitate the process of realizing *Atman*. This is shown through his recognition of his mistakes and misunderstandings and the reactivation of empathy and compassion in his life. His reconciliation with his wife, Vasanthi, at the end of the novel denotes a renewal of human relations. The reconciliation brings Rajan closer to the feeling of wholeness and peacefulness of *Atman*.

1.11.5 Chapter Five: Reclaiming *Atman* through the land in *Between Lives*

This chapter focuses on Maniam's third and final novel, *Between Lives*. Firstly, I explore the protagonist's (Sumitra's) identity crisis as a young, liberal and modern Indian woman attempting to understand the true nature of her selfhood. I argue that the protagonist's predicament is mainly spiritual and the negligence of spirituality in her life affects her principles, beliefs, and behaviour. Her relationship with another major character (Sellamma) who exudes mystical and spiritual qualities opens up Sumitra's process of self-transformation. The relationship subsequently liberates Sumitra and allows her to reclaim *Atman* (True Self).

I also explore the connection between various settings and the emotions they evoke. I argue that Sellamma's land represents the realm of *Brahman* (Absolute Reality), while other settings such as Sumitra's house, her work place, and the Charlie Wong Recreation Club represent *maya* (phenomenal reality). While Sellamma's land instils peacefulness, the negative emotions generated by the other settings expose the identity crisis and internal suffering faced by some of the characters. In turn, Sellamma's land becomes the avenue through which the characters could surmount their inner suffering and recover their true self (*Atman*).

In this novel, I also explore the concept of "silence" which is a recurring motif in the novel. It signals the presence of "True Self" and "Absolute Reality". In this chapter, I argue that the only way to experience the true quality of *Atman* or *Brahman* is through stillness; a complete annihilation of identification with the phenomenal world. I argue that it is through the experience of silence that the characters gain insight into the true nature of self and reality.

Accordingly, I will argue the importance of spirituality in facilitating the rehabilitation of healthy human relationships. I argue that spirituality allows the protagonist (Sumitra) to reactivate a sense of openness, empathy, moral duty, and responsibility towards her family and community. This is indicated by the reconciliation between Sumitra and her family and their collective endeavour to preserve Sellamma's land from destruction.

1.11.6 Chapter Six: Summary of Findings and Suggestions for Further Research

This chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing the research problems, research findings and reemphasizing the centrality of spirituality in identity construction in K.S Maniam's novels. I reassert that Hindu philosophy and spirituality provide the alternative paradigm for identity construction in K.S Maniam's novels. I also reassert that this alternative discourse of identity (through Hinduism) is strategically used by Maniam to articulate his voice as an Asian/Indian author. I wrap up my thesis with suggestions for future research on Maniam's novels in particular, and Malaysian Literature in English, in general.

1.12 Conclusion

The heart of this thesis is in its endeavour to accentuate the role of spirituality in identity construction in K.S Maniam's novels. I use the term 'rethinking' to suggest how spirituality could become a viable paradigm through which one defines one's sense of self. The current existing discourse of identity in K.S Maniam's novels has often neglected the transformative capacity of spirituality and how it could revolutionize and restructure the human identity and experience of reality. In a way, this thesis attempts to reinvigorate the discourse of spirituality and its relationship with identity by focusing on its (spirituality) positive and timeless wisdom on the nature of self and reality. Truth, morality, ethics, duty, responsibility, empathy and compassion are just some of the many features of spiritual wisdom found in many spiritual traditions. These are some of the universal virtues expounded and shared by many religions and spiritual movements. Therefore, the recourse to religion and spirituality is not an archaic move, parochial and/or inward looking as some would suggest. Rather, it is indeed a potential departure point for a more inclusive and encompassing discourse of human identity.

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BIODATA OF STUDENT

Mohammad Ewan Bin Awang was born in Miri, Sarawak. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Universiti Putra Malaysia. Currently, he is a tutor in the Department of English, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His research interests include Literary and Cultural Criticism and Malaysian Literature in English.



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