



***DECENTERING THE MASTER DISCOURSE AND LOCATING THE
CONTINUITY OF INDIANNESS IN RANI MANICKA'S 'THE RICE MOTHER'
AND 'THE JAPANESE LOVER'***

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Arts**

August 2013

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To the 'angels' who helped me when I needed them most.

"Have you ever considered that, just perhaps, the reason you have
gotten as far as you have is because of the invisible work of
anonymous Angels?"
- Gary Kinnaman



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
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The British occupation of Malaya was an ideological apparatus in the guise of nationalism that was used to politicise identity through racial consciousness and the politics of education. Although this idea was the primary concern of many early Malaysian Literature in English (MLIE) writers such as K. S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando, this study instead examines the politicisation of identity brought about by the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II. In doing so, the study focuses on the human suffering wrought by this occupation, as seen through the perspective of Indian families who lived through the war. In other words, the study examines the decentering of the master discourse (against the enduring significance of British occupation on Malaysia) and traces the location and continuity of Indianness in two novels by the diasporic Malaysian Indian

writer Rani Manicka, namely *The Rice Mother* (2002) and *The Japanese Lover* (2010). The respective protagonists and settings of both novels, in which the Japanese occupation becomes the primary discourse, are situated within the framework of poststructural feminism and postcolonialism so as to explore changing thematic patterns and the continuity of Indian religious beliefs, philosophy and customs impacted by the era of colonisation. Both *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover* are also read using a hermeneutical approach; that is, in cognisance of the fact that Manicka is writing within a definite historical context—the context of MLIE and a nationalistic narrative which tends to downplay the significance of the Japanese occupation on the formation of the Malaysian Indian cultural identity. The study also examines how Manicka, through these two novels, challenges unceasing patriarchal and colonial bias. The study finds that Manicka ‘completes’ Maniam’s narrative by not only having her characters avoid the trap of transcendental escapism into a mythological past, but also by sublating the consciousness of their ethnic past into a wider political consciousness.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia untuk memenuhi keperluan ijazah Sarjana Sastera

PENYAHPUKATAN WACANA INDUK DAN MENCARI KESINAMBUNGAN IDENTITI INDIA DALAM NOVEL 'THE RICE MOTHER' DAN 'THE JAPANESE LOVER' OLEH RANI MANICKA

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Penjajahan British di Malaya merupakan alat ideologi dalam bentuk nasionalisme yang telah digunakan untuk mempolitikkan identiti melalui kesedaran etnik dan politik pendidikan. Meskipun idea ini menjadi fokus kepada ramai penulis awal kesusasteraan Malaysia dalam bahasa Inggeris (MLIE) seperti K. S. Maniam dan Lloyd Fernando, tesis ini sebaliknya mengkaji pempolitan identiti yang diakibatkan oleh penjajahan Jepun di Malaya semasa Perang Dunia Kedua. Secara khususnya, tesis ini memfokus kepada penderitaan manusia sewaktu itu dari perspektif keluarga India yang telah melalui zaman perang. Dengan kata lain, tesis ini mengkaji penyahpusatan 'wacana induk'—iaitu kesignifikanan yang berpanjangan penjajahan British ke atas Malaysia—dan mencari kesinambungan identiti India dalam dua novel oleh

penulis diaspora Malaysia berketurunan India, Rani Manicka. Novel yang dipilih untuk kajian ini ialah *The Rice Mother* (2002) dan *The Japanese Lover* (2010). Protagonis dan latar kedua-dua novel ini, yang menjadikan penjajahan Jepun sebagai wacana utama, akan diteliti melalui kerangka feminisme pascastruktural dan pascakolonialisme untuk meneroka corak perubahan tema serta kesinambungan kepercayaan agama, falsafah dan adat India, yang berhubung kait dengan era kolonialisasi. Novel *The Rice Mother* dan *The Japanese Lover* ini juga dikaji menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutik. Dengan kata lain, kajian ini mengambil kira konteks Manicka sebagai penulis dalam konteks yang spesifik—iaitu dalam konteks MLIE dan juga konteks naratif nasionalistik yang meremehkan kesignifikanan penjajahan Jepun ke atas pembentukan identiti dan budaya kaum India di Malaysia. Tesis ini juga meneliti bagaimana Manicka, melalui novel-novel ini, mencabar kecondongan kolonial dan patriarki. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa Manicka ‘melengkapkan’ naratif Maniam dengan melakarkan watak yang menghindari perangkap eskapisme transedental untuk kembali ke mitos masa silam. Malah, watak-watak dalam novel yang dikaji didapati telah sebaliknya membawa kesedaran etnik masa silam ini kepada kesedaran politik yang lebih luas.

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"We all have angels guiding us...They look after us. They heal us, touch us, comfort us with invisible warm hands...What will bring their help? Asking. Giving thanks."

- Sophy Burnham

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Being of Malaysian Indian origin myself, it seems only natural that I write about my own community. It is commonly accepted that a writer writes about what he knows best. That material would stem from his immediate family background, society outside his family and his educational background.”
- K.S. Maniam

1.1 Overview

This chapter examines the decentering of the historical master discourse and looks at the continuity of Indianness as presented in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2002) and *The Japanese Lover* (2010) through both a poststructural feminist perspective and a postcolonial perspective. What the historical master discourse refers to here is the British occupation of Malaya, in its functioning as an ideological apparatus¹ in the guise of nationalism that influenced the politicising of the cultural identity in the nation state. In both novels, Manicka negates the stated significance of this master discourse on the formation of Malaysian Indian cultural identity, and focuses instead on the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II.

¹ Louis Althusser describes “Ideological State Apparatuses” as social institutions that repress the people via non-physical (i.e., ideological) means, such as religious, educational, legal, and political systems, and even communications and cultural structures, that can and do transmit bourgeois ideology (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”).

Notwithstanding Malaysian history books, the works of early Malaysian literature in English (MLIE) writers also underlined the historical significance of this master discourse, though not entirely in the same way. The pre-independence political class of the country can be said to have aligned themselves to the British colonialists after the end of the war in attempting to diffuse an internal communist threat—which emerged directly as a result of the Japanese occupation, and threatened to destroy many of the hierarchical power structures that the British had laid in place for Malayan independence. One of these structures was the ‘divide and rule’ policy, which reached a point of culmination in 1970 with the passing of several laws that—culturally, at least—effectively designated the ethnic Malay and indigenous communities as true natives (Bumiputras), and the Indian and Chinese communities as Others.

In a sense, MLIE writers who remained in Malaysia and continued to write were compelled to tiptoe around this Bumiputra-Other dichotomy or the ‘nationalistic narrative’²—the forged spirit of nationalism which Clive Kessler holds is characterised by “three candidate variants,” namely the “Islamic,” the “vernacular-populist” and the “aristocratic-bureaucratic with their distinctive *évolué* elites” (106). In the works of K. S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando, for instance, this tiptoeing manifested itself in the characters of their novels attempting to achieve a sense of national unity—sometimes at the expense of

² Holly Catling cites Rogers Brubaker in claiming that there is a fundamental discord between the “ideal of membership” to a nation-state (especially one that is newly emerged), and the “actual existence of and practice” of the norms the state is supposed to stand for. As such, “the ideal of a ‘nation-state’ as a fixed identity exists in theory alone,” and requires for its sustenance the creation of “national myths” (“State Construction and the Use of National Narratives”).

their own cultural heritage or communal norms, but always as a reaction to the 'divide and rule' ethnic segregation imposed by the British.

Although the effects of the Japanese occupation have been addressed in a number of MLIE works—most notably in Sybil Kathigasu's *No Dram of Mercy* (1954)—the experience of the occupation itself has been quite noticeably relegated to the peripheries of Malaysian history, especially in terms of its cultural impact. Beyond anecdotes of the unspeakable suffering that all Malaysians at the time had to endure, the Japanese occupation is not usually noted as an experience that engendered any significant alterations in the cultural self-perception of any of the country's ethnic groups.

With regard to the Indian community of Malaysia, there is feasibly no literary figure more synonymous with explorations into their "past, present, psychology, conflicts and ambitions" than K. S. Maniam (Quayum and Wicks 264). Maniam's most famous work, *The Return* (1981) "describe[s] a process of emerging from colonialism" (Patke and Holden 91). As with Lloyd Fernando before him, Maniam is wont to draw a straight line between the identity politics introduced during the British occupation to the racial riots of 13 May 1969—which eventually came to be seen as a veritable ground zero, shaping the present iterations of cultural identities in Malaysia.

Manicka, on the other hand, spotlights the Japanese occupation in her works. This study contends that in both *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover*,

Manicka picks up, as it were, where Kathigas and Maniam left off, to “describe the process” of Malaysian Indians emerging from the Japanese occupation, specifically in terms how they were able to maintain a continuity of ethnic identity during and after the war. As Shamita Dasgupta notes, “ethnic identity can be understood as a part of the self that consciously anchors an individual to a particular ethnic group” and that “central to this identity is a sense of belonging, as well as a commitment to the group’s values, beliefs, behaviours, conventions and customs” (73). What is meant by the *continuity* of ethnic identity in Manicka’s novels not only refers to the maintenance of traditional culture by a diasporic community in the host country, but also through the tumultuous backdrop of war and occupation.

This examination of the struggles of Malaysians during the Japanese occupation as represented by the thematic patterns in Manicka’s novels, reveals changing cultural values as manifested in Indian religious beliefs, philosophy and customs. Moreover, Manicka also diverges from Maniam by taking a more matriarchal approach to her writing, as she highlights the struggles of female characters, who are driven by their wartime experiences to become more resilient, individualistic, passionate and complex. Lakshmi in *The Rice Mother*, for instance, is a carefree teenager in Sri Lanka who one day finds herself traded in marriage to a stranger twenty years older than her in Malaya. Forced to bear many children, Lakshmi then morphs into a sturdy matriarchal figure who has to endure a horrifying series of events—including the abduction, rape and murder of her eldest daughter—to secure a better future for her children.

Similarly, *The Japanese Lover* charts the journey of Parvathi from Sri Lanka to Malaya to marry a rich stranger. Blighted by poverty and desperate to ensure that his daughter is taken care of, Parvathi's father shows a marriage broker a picture of a more attractive girl, and manages to secure a wedding to a rich Indian man living in Malaya, Kasu Marimuthu. Although initially enraged with the trickery, Kasu then takes pity on Parvathi and allows her to stay with him, resulting in a loveless marriage and two children. With Kasu dying from alcoholism with the onset of war, the invading Japanese take over Kasu's palatial mansion, and Parvathi becomes a comfort woman for General Hattori. Initially, Parvathi gives herself up sexually to protect her daughter, but over time, comes to feel affection for Hattori.

Both these women suffer greatly, but ultimately have to rely on themselves to get back on their feet. As Rosalind Delmar states, "...women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that satisfaction of these needs requires radical change in the present, social, economic, political order." (9) What this demonstrates is that both women were forced to learn to adapt to the grim realities of their present situation—namely, the upheavals and atrocities brought about by the Japanese occupation—which in turn catalysed breaks in the cultural narrative that they were supposed to live by and pass on to their children.

1.2 Literature Review

It needs to be explained here that arguably, the first real stirrings of nationalism arose during this period of Japanese occupation, in the form of the British-assisted Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). However, the organisation then formed the core of the Malayan Communist Party (PKM) after the fall of the Japanese, which actively engaged the British colonialists in a guerrilla war. The local political class of the country, who did not want Malaya to become a communist state, then forged a greater alliance with the British in attempting to snuff out the communist threat. As Paul Kratoska explains, the nationalism that was fermented during the occupation was cemented after the return of the British colonialists, who "engaged in a process of localization of power which led to independence" (353). This is relevant in terms of explaining just why the colonialist discourse became the master discourse, and in turn, why voices on the effects of the Japanese occupation were for a long time muted. With the MPAJA troops turning on their British allies and morphing into a belligerent PKM, an unusual situation arose:

The former enemy was now a friend, people who had at the very least acquiesced in the rule of the Japanese had become key figures in the shaping of the independent Federation of Malaya and Republic of Singapore, and the organisation that had spearheaded the wartime resistance had declared itself the enemy of those independent states (Kratoska 354).

This relative silence was felt in every circle. Not only did the ruling elite of Malaysia and Singapore remain selectively quiet due to their newfound

allegiance to their former colonial masters, but academics published next to nothing on the occupation in the decade that followed the end of the war (Yoji 250). In Japan itself, studies on the occupation were “frozen” for over a decade due to a collective sense of disgust towards the actions of their own military, and a new “strong current of postwar anti-war pacifism in the country” (250). Malaysian and Singaporean studies on the occupation appeared much later, with the works of G. P. Ramachandra, Halimah Bamadhaj, Cheah Boon Kheng, and Paul Kratoska, among others, being published in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yoji provides four explanations for this silence. The first is the lack of training in Southeast Asian studies; academics in Japan were unwilling to write about the occupation for fear of being accused of being collaborators, and as a result, there was a distinct lack of historians in other parts of the world who were qualified to write exclusively on Southeast Asian history (254). Another reason was the lack of access to archival sources, since many of the papers on the Japanese military were either destroyed by the troops themselves, or seized by the British after the surrender (254). Additionally, Japanese troops who were repatriated could not take any of their own written records back home to Japan, save for those by a few high-ranking officials which were stored in the War History Department Archives in Japan (254). And by the time these archives were more accessible to members of the public, many of the repatriated troops were already in their 70s and 80s, which made an oral reconstruction of the war difficult (255).

More literary accounts of the occupation did emerge soon after the end of the war, but were still conspicuously limited in number. The first MLIE works set during the Japanese occupation of Malaya include Ooi Cheng Teik's verse novel *Red Sun Over Malaya: John Man's Ordeal* (1948), and Chin Kee Onn's *Ma-rai-ee* (1952). These novels depicted the realities of the hardships Malaysians had to endure at the hands of their Japanese captors. David Lim describes *Ma-rai-ee* as a novel

which paints a stark picture of a time when the entire Malayan economy collapsed, food became scarce, malnutrition was rife, and the populace lived in fear of joining the thousands who were massacred by the Japanese troops for the slightest real or perceived infractions. ("Agency and the Pedagogy of Japanese Colonialism in Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain*," 234)

The Japanese occupation was most famously brought to the forefront of public consciousness in Kathigasu's autobiographical narrative, *No Dram of Mercy*, which describes her own capture and torture by Japanese troops. Shirley Geok-lin Lim notes that "as a part-Irish Eurasian," Kathigasu "was a privileged woman in a colonised society," whose narrative goes against nationalist ideology in pre-independence Malaysia because of "the protagonist's unswerving pro-British stance, her sympathetic view of the MPAJA, and her Catholic faith" (in Patke and Holden 166).

This deviation from the nationalist ideology—that of being more opposed to Japanese than British occupation—is significant because it is perhaps the reason why the influence of the Japanese military on the formation of cultural

consciousness in Malaysia is often underplayed in official history books. Echoing Shirley Lim, Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden (1994) term this deviation the “ideological gulf”³ (167) that separated Kathigasu from ordinary Malaysians, despite her narrative having “the immediacy of first-hand experience recounted without fuss or exaggeration” (58). In the introduction to *No Dram of Mercy*, Bernard Chauly notes that *No Dram of Mercy* recounts “one woman’s struggle and sacrifice driven by deep personal conviction for justice, in the face of inhumanity at a time when Malaya was upside down,” and more significantly in light of the present study, that “for the majority of the Malaysian public, the simple message is: here is a story we should all know. One that should be in our history books” (x).

But the omission of the significance of the Japanese occupation continued thereafter. Fernando’s *The Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993), for instance, are arguably the texts most synonymous with the interracial construction of Malaysia, while Maniam is noted for depicting “contemporary urban and regional Malaysia” specifically in terms of “the experiences of extended Indian Malaysian families where the Indian perspective is bound up with the vexed issue of Indian participation in twentieth century Malaysia” (Wicks, “K. S. Maniam”). As noted above, however, the works of both these

³ What Patke and Holden mean by ‘ideological gulf’ here is Kathigasu’s unwavering pro-British stance; as Wong Soak Koon points out, the frequency with which Kathigasu mentions the return of the British to Malaya in her autobiography indicate her framing of the pre-war colonial period as somehow idyllic, or a “sheltering conception.” “Nationalist ferment and agitation for independence from the British would be hard for someone of Kathigasu’s pro-British leanings to acknowledge” (Wong 88).

authors are inclined to largely attribute the formation of ethnic consciousness to the period of British colonisation, which negates somewhat the effects of the Japanese wartime occupation.

This refers largely to the bloody racial riots of 13 May 1969, which are usually framed as the culmination of centuries of distrust among ethnic communities (primarily the Chinese and Malays), as a result of the colonialist divide and rule policy. As Malaysia was still in the throes of fighting PKM, there were initial attempts to attribute the riots to them, but these claims were not verified by many sources (Cheah 146). However, as Cheah Boon Kheng notes, the communists were involved in the riots, if only indirectly:

The failures and weaknesses of multi-ethnic and noncommunal parties like the socialist parties in Malaysia allowed the forces of communalism to grow stronger. The negligible participation of socialist parties in the May 1969 general elections, for instance, indicates that they had allowed the communal parties, by default, to dominate the field. After the riots, communalism, not communism, began to be in the ascendancy. With the departure of Tunku Abdul Rahman from office in 1971, his successor Tun Abdul Razak's administration saw Malay political primacy in the ascendancy, the Malay language enforced more vigorously in education and in the public domain. Razak's New Economic Policy (NEP) was vigorously implemented in favour of Malays (146).

The above is relevant because it is the very rise of "communal" politics—or ethnic-based politics, with the major political parties in the country corresponding to the major ethnic groups in the country—that allowed the Malay-centric nationalist narrative described above to take root in popular consciousness. As such, MLIE writers writing in the aftermath of 1969 were not only keen to tread

lightly when addressing issues of race relations (for fear of appearing incendiary), but were also able to draw a direct causative link between 1969 and the segregational policies of the British. In this way, the fundamental insecurity that some of these writers felt about displaying their own ethnic heritage manifested as the assumption of a diasporic identity—despite being Malaysian citizens—and in turn, rendering their characters as being in search of a reconciliation between the equally abstract notions of national and cultural identity. The notion of ‘diaspora’ here encompasses the core elements of

a past dispersal from an original homeland, identification with co-ethnic communities within and outside the host country, and a relationship with the host country made problematic by the opposing demands on the community’s emotional, cultural and political allegiance by both the ancestral homeland and the host country. (Chuah 77)

And as Chuah Guat Eng notes, the sense of alienation underpinning these core elements can be read in the nationalist policies that came to define post-1969 Malaysia.

It is perhaps indicative of a fundamental kinship between traditional diaspora and nationalist ideologies that a similar narrative underpins Malaysia’s national literature policy, which classifies only literature originally written in the national language (Malay) as ‘national’ literature and those written in non-indigenous languages (for example, in Tamil, Chinese, and English) as ‘sectional’ or ‘communal’ literature (*sastera sukuan*). (Chuah 77)

In response to Noritah Omar’s query on whether MLIE should in its entirety be classified as diasporic, given that it “belongs linguistically to the pool of world literatures in English,” Chuah adds that the writing of MLIE novels can be said to

be a “diasporic activity,” given that the overwhelming majority of MLIE writers happen to be of non-Malay ethnic descent, with some of those even being domiciled outside Malaysia. In this sense, Manicka can be considered ‘twice diasporic’, both because of her Indian ethnic heritage and the fact that she is part of the Malaysian diaspora—born and educated in Malaysia but dividing her time between Malaysia and the United Kingdom. In other words, Manicka’s extant diasporic ethnic consciousness despite her global identity, is indicative of a sense of continuity because *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover* still expound a pivotal moment in Malaysia’s history and portray thematic patterns of other Malaysian writers of Indian descent, specifically one that is based on Indian ethnic consciousness.

Before delving into the period of Japanese occupation highlighted by Manicka, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of Maniam’s oeuvre. This is because Manicka’s novels can, as noted previously, be seen as an extension of Maniam, at least in terms of the Indian diaspora being a running concern. As a new contemporary writer, there are limited interviews and published articles on the works of Rani Manicka but she herself attests that “every single event in history good and bad leaves consequences in its wake, more often than not, far reaching” (Appendix C). As Panchanan Dalai notes:

Maniam’s works clearly unravel the world of history, culture, language, religion, belief and ideology that compel us to realise the feasibility of having any ‘essential’ or ‘absolute’ understanding of diaspora. Most of the diasporic writings from the island countries, that were once the British colonies, defy the notion of reading diaspora from a universal perspective. They rather define how different

existential predicaments of diaspora largely define the meaning of diaspora and diasporic literature. (8)

Maniam's first novel, *The Return* (1981), highlights the problems faced by the Indian diasporic community in its "omissions rather than its inclusions" (Shirley Lim 49). What this means is that the stiltedness of Maniam's prose functions to underline the "implicit reservations the writer must adopt in order to reveal the really conflicting issues that lie hidden behind the superficial Malaysian peace" (Maniam "The Malaysian Novelist," 81). In the end, the forging of commonality among the members of the Indian diaspora despite their different experiences and ideologies—in itself an act of resistance against the very externality that gave rise to the diaspora in the first place, namely British colonialism—stands for the myriad social fabric of the country at large.

A related but different object of resistance exists in the narrative of *In A Far Country* (1993). The protagonist has to "battle with the inherent alterities in the Malaysianness of his identity" (Wilson 404) by mythologising the "nationalistic mythology" (Gabriel 244)—the symbol of the tiger—so as to resist the jettisoning of his own cultural identity that is required for full assimilation into the Malaysian state. In other words, the protagonist—standing for ethnic minorities in Malaysia—wants to feel a sense of belonging, but is forced to rework the nationalistic narrative that is insisted upon by the state in order to resist being completely subsumed within it.

Pre-independence, the voices of ethnic minorities had to be largely discarded in favour of the colonial narrative, such as is evidenced in the protagonist's embrace of the English language. Maniam himself explains that the protagonist's assimilation into the colonial narrative set him "on the road to personal conflict"—the conflict being the clash of Asian values with a Western education (Maniam "The Malaysian Novelist," 267). Instead of expressing themselves freely post-independence, however, these minorities found that they had to once again silence themselves in service to the new Malay-centric nationalistic narrative (Wilson 416).

In relation to the above, Bernard Wilson also adds that Maniam's third novel, *Between Lives* (2003), employs Nietzschean modes of historical consciousness:

the unhistorical, which comprises the power of 'forgetting', of limiting one's horizon; the historical, which is what we understand by conventional history...and finally the superhistorical—a sense that allows for greater cultural vision, one that encompasses art and religion. (417)

It is only through the superhistorical mode that the individuals in Maniam's text are imbued with the necessary agency to sublimate their own ethnic heritage into a larger narrative of "multicultural national unity" (417). However, Maniam does not see himself as an explicitly political writer. As he states:

Politics is what people like to see in my work. Yes, it has always been there, but they like to see only that part of it. For me, politics is only one of the forces that shape people's lives. It is the resistance to those forces that, for me, is the greater force within the people: how they survive, how they are not overwhelmed, how they seek their

voice or sometimes their agency. (in David Lim, *The Infinite Longing for Home* 127)

Although the context differs, Manicka similarly concentrates on her protagonists' "resistance" to external factors—namely, how these protagonists "survive" and "seek agency" in the face of being forcibly transplanted from their home countries, only to find themselves victimised by the brutalities of war. What is remarkable about the characters in both Maniam's and Manicka's texts is that they do not allow themselves to be crushed under the weight of history, and become culturally reclusive, but rather resist their oppressive circumstances using the force of their cultural expression for greater inclusiveness in their new societies.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Lloyd Fernando's novels have always been studied when it comes to the nation's inter-racial construction and the 'contemporary urban and regional Malaysia' is covered by K.S. Maniam who 'specifically focuses on the experiences of extended Indian Malaysian families where the Indian perspective is bound up with the vexed issue of Indian participation in twentieth century Malaysia' (Wicks 389). However much Malaysian male authors of Indian descent such as Fernando and Maniam have contributed to the MLIE "canon", it is necessary for their perspectives to be balanced out by female voices. Manicka's *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover* are selected for this study for precisely this reason. Besides being written by a woman, both novels show

how Indian cultural mores are adapted to external circumstances—the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II—and transmitted to future generations through matriarchal structures. This is especially significant because other Malaysian female fiction writers of Indian descent, such as Uma Mahendran, Marie Gerrina Louis, Aneeta Sundararaj, Shoba Mano, or Shamini Flint are found not to tackle this particular period of Malaysian history. This study therefore examines the continuity of Indianness in relation to this pivotal moment of history through the eyes of Manicka's main Indian female characters.

1.4 Significance of the Study

As Muhammad A. Quayum notes, MLIE writers originate from diverse cultural backgrounds with different “imaginations and value systems.” This situation then requires these writers to create an environment of “horizontal comradeship” whereby they learn to empathise with each other's cultures, so as to “contribute to the formation of a common pool of consciousness.” Quayum adds that this, in effect, will require writers to step into what Derek Walcott terms a “historyless zone” which will facilitate the construction of a shared consciousness (3). This sentiment is also echoed by Bernard Wilson, who claims that the affirmation of ethnic heritage in Maniam's works is invariably an affirmation of the collective, the “universe in man” (392). Manicka's writings are crucial in this sense, as they not only shed light on her female characters' retention of identity through strong bonds with Indian culture and religion, but also the overall distress and deprivation that the Japanese Occupation caused. It is through empathy with the

particular experiences of Malaysian Indian women during the war that the universal can be discovered, and a common “pool of consciousness” built.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

Based on the significance of the study described above, this study aims to fulfil three main objectives:

1. To examine the struggles and suffering of Malaysian Indian women in the selected works during the Japanese occupation, leading to the decentering of the master discourse;
2. To show understanding of the continuity of Indian ethnic consciousness via the agency of Malaysian Indian women, through their roles in the perpetuation of religious beliefs and customary practices in the selected works.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study explores how Malaysian Indian culture is transformed and transmitted in two of Manicka's novels, *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover*. This is done by examining Manicka's decentering of the commonly accepted master (British) discourse brought about by British colonisation, to instead concentrate on the Japanese occupation. The Japanese occupation of Malaya and the post war period have been addressed by Malaysian literary works in Malay by literary

stalwarts such as A. Samad Said, Ahmad Murad Nasaruddin, Harun Aminurashid and A. Rahim Kajai, as well as female authors such as Zaharah Nawawi who have already featured the perils faced by Malaysians during this period quite extensively.

However the corpus of the Japanese occupation within MLIE is limited to Sybil Kathigasu's autobiographical narrative and works of fiction by Tash Aw; *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012). These fictive works are all set during the Japanese occupation, however as mentioned earlier, this study focuses on Malaysian female fiction writers of Indian descent who have centred on the Japanese occupation and not the master discourse, the British occupation. Based on this criterion, Rani Manicka and these two novels were selected.

Additionally, both novels were also chosen because of the female perspective they provide, in terms of the writer and her central characters being female. As such, a poststructural feminist and postcolonial reading of the two texts is adopted, so as to investigate how Indianness is perpetuated by Malaysian Indian women (within the context of occupation) through Indian religious beliefs and customary practices. Given that there is a limited amount of critical literature on the two novels as well as on the author, Rani Manicka, the study relies primarily on close textual analysis.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapter One is the introduction, which incorporates the literature review, statement of the problem, research objectives, significance of the study and its scope and limitations. The second chapter contains the methodology, which examines relevant literature on poststructural feminism, postcolonialism as well as hermeneutics. The chapter discusses how and in what ways this study relates to such literature. The third chapter contains the historical context which is the Japanese occupation of Malaya that is used by Rani Manicka in her two novels. The fourth chapter contains the discussion proper, and examines the decentering of the master discourse and the continuity of Indianness in *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover*. A hermeneutic textual analysis of both novels is carried out in this chapter, from the perspective of poststructuralist feminism and postcolonialism. The study's major points made in this chapter are subsequently summarised in the fifth and final chapter.

1.8 Summary

As this introductory chapter has explained, this study started with the aim of examining the decentering of the continuing master discourse (British) discourse (as a result of the British occupation of Malaya) to one that centers on the Japanese occupation. This is done through a hermeneutic analysis of two novels by Rani Manicka, *The Rice Mother* and *The Japanese Lover*, within the

framework of poststructural feminism and postcolonialism. The selection of Manicka and her novels is rationalised by expounding her context of following the footsteps of earlier Malaysian Indian writers such as K. S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando, in choosing to write in English about the (Malaysian) Indian experience. The objectives as stated in the chapter are constructed to achieve the thesis's general purpose of decentering the master discourse and locating the continuity of Indian culture, religious beliefs and customary practices as represented by the characters in Manicka's novels.

This study acknowledges the contribution of earlier MLIE writers such as Maniam and Fernando, but departs from it to focus on other newer voices. Manicka, who follows in the footsteps of Maniam and Fernando as a Malaysian Indian writer, brings a different dimension to the voices being represented, for she is not only female, but twice diasporic. It is hoped that this study will contribute to highlighting other newer MLIE voices as represented by Manicka, particularly minority voices which are female and diasporic. It follows that the study hopes to also draw attention to the continuity of Indian ethnic consciousness by means of the persistence of old traditions (in religious beliefs and customs) despite, or because of, the traumatic experience of the Japanese occupation.

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