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## **MALAYSIAN LANDSCAPES IN THE FICTION OF K S MANIAM**

### **Introduction**

In his prolific output of fiction, including two published novels and numerous stories, K S Maniam has explored and revealed a range of Malaysian landscapes for the people who live there. Whilst acknowledging that “landscape” is an elusive concept that is difficult readily to define, this analysis accepts Victor Savage’s broad approach to landscape as a “living process “ which involves “the total sensually perceptible features of a person’s experience at a particular place and time.” (1) For Maniam, the landscapes are variously natural and cultural, exterior and interior, childlike and adult, a rich panorama.

Accordingly, the paper examines such dimensions of landscape as physical settings, memory, dream, and imagination, mind and personality, margins and shadows, as well as institutions from plantation to coffee shop. Through all these settings, Maniam has furnished a vital and authentic Malaysian mosaic. This paper considers the significance of this mosaic through a thematic study of Maniam’s fictional output to date, i.e. from 1976 to the present. The American author, Joyce Carol Oates, has observed that “all artists know either consciously or instinctively that the secret intention of their life’s work is to rescue from the plunge of time something of beauty, permanence, significance,”(2) and so it is with Maniam as literary artist, and with Malaysia as place

and experience. This analysis also draws on the key basic assumptions set out by Altick and Fenstermaker in *The Art of Literary Research* (1993), firstly that to understand the meaning of a text, it is necessary to know as much as possible about its creator, the author, and secondly that authors and texts are products of particular social and historical contexts.(3)

### **About the Author**

Born Subramaniam Krishnan in 1942, K S Maniam is of Hindu, Tamil and working-class background. His birthplace was Bedong in Kedah, north Malaysia, and he was the descendant of a grandmother who had migrated from India to the Malay Peninsula around 1916. Maniam was raised in a hospital compound, where his father was the hospital 'dhobi' or laundryman, and would accompany his parents to their second job of rubber-tapping on a nearby estate, so that he became familiar at first-hand with the lifestyle of the Tamil estate workers there. Maniam attended the Tamil estate school for a year, and then insisted on transferring to the Ibrahim English school at Sungei Petani, a change that was substantially to alter the course of his life. Decades later, Maniam recalled that the Tamil school at Bedong had taken place in a "primitive hall ... sitting in the middle of nowhere." There was an atmosphere of fear, where the principal teacher "beat the Tamil Primer and elementary arithmetic into our heads with a heavy, brass-ruled ferule".(4) By contrast, he notes, there was "something ethereal about being in an English school."(5) After completing English-medium schooling in 1960, he spent a few months as pupil-teacher, and then left for India, where he was briefly to study medicine.

From India, he went to England to study teacher education. During his stay in England, from 1962 to 1964, he attended the Malayan Teachers College in Wolverhampton, residing at Brinsford Lodge where his fellow-lodgers were ethnically-mixed, an experience he found positive on the whole. As Maniam remembers:

"The Brinsford Lodge society was a truly Malaysian society in that everyone, irrespective of his or her race and culture, shared a common spirit of living together. There was hardly any racial prejudice or cultural intolerance. For a would-be writer this experience was not only necessary but vital for it allowed him entry into other personalities, cultures and languages." (6)

But Brinsford was far from Kedah. On successfully completing his Certificate of Education, Maniam returned to Malaysia and taught in various rural schools in his home state of Kedah until 1970, when he enrolled in an undergraduate Arts/English degree course at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. After completing a BA (Hons), he went on to obtain a Master's degree in English Literature, involving a thesis on "A Critical History of Malaysian and Singaporean Poetry in English." His academic career commenced in 1979, when he was appointed to a lectureship in English at the University of Malaya. He retired from an Associate Professorship in the Department of English at that University in 1997. Maniam escaped the desperate confines of his small

town/plantation childhood through English-medium education, and even now he publicly affirms that the English language has given him a centre to life.(7)

“Ratnamuni” was Maniam’s first published short story. Dynamic in its form, language, and content, “Ratnamuni” takes the form of a dramatic monologue, based on the inner consciousness of a semi-literate estate worker, Muniandy, and his attempts to make some sense both of his complex familial relationships and his life in a new land. For Muniandy, there is just one burning question: who is the father of his much-loved son? Is it his quiet neighbour, Muthiah, who always seemed to have his nose in a book, studying to be a clerk (8), or is it Muniandy himself? On the answer to this crucial question hangs either triumph or tragedy for the narrator and title character. The linguistic vehicle of the story is starkly conveyed in its very first sentence: “Repot-kepot, *ayah*. I cannot tell straight.”(9) Here is Malaysian English, or Mingleish, in full flower. Muniandy is a more complex character than he first appears, and becomes in fact a vehicle for many of the familiar, characteristic themes of Maniam’s prose writing, such as light and darkness, the immanence of Hinduism, the density and naturalness of Hindu ritual, the process of migration across the Bay of Bengal to a new and unfamiliar land, this ‘Ma-la-ya’, the male who struggles in personal relationships with women, and the daily grind of hard labour, poverty, drudgery, boredom, promiscuity, and domestic violence temporarily made once-removed by drunkenness. Via his magical drum, the *uduku*, Muniandy instinctively reaches back to the illusions of his past in the “Big Country” (ie India)(10), and tends to answer practical questions in terms of Hindu metaphysics like: “The Lord Siva danced and made the world.”(11)

## **The Physical Settings**

Edward Said has confirmed the intricate, authentic linkage between literature and society:

“I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are ... very much in the history of their societies, shaping and being shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure.” (12)

Muniandy, the narrator of “Ratnamuni” declared that he stayed all his life in Bedong (13). His story is, as the author confirms, “..grounded on recognisable and clearly defined physical and social landscapes.” (14) Like Muniandy, Maniam’s cultural roots remain in a small town and adjacent rubber estate in the north of the peninsula. Even one year of Tamil-medium estate schooling at a very early age, reflects Maniam, meant he had been:

“ exposed to an environment and a language that would trail me for the rest of my life. The environment was the estate houses, the rubber trees and the red, laterite road that led away from the main, tar road, into remoteness.” (15)

Indeed, the Malaysian plantation and its surrounding community constitute for Maniam what the major writer of the American South, William Faulkner, liked to call the "old ineradicable rhythm .. the fundamental passions and obsessions that fired writer and culture into life - animating them, inspiring them sometimes, and, at others, debilitating or even crippling them." (16) For Maniam, notes the Malaysian literary critic, Margaret Yong, Kedah is not merely a name on the map of his fiction, but rather "Kedah's geography valorises a complete territory identifiably his own." (17) In fact, Kedah is for K S Maniam what Jackson, Mississippi, was for the American novelist, Eudora Welty, who observed:

“I wanted to, and I still do, regard it as a base, which helps me in writing. I feel it’s some sort of touchstone. It’s what I check up by, in the sense that I know it so well I don’t have to wonder about whether I have got it right.”(18)

Some of the best episodes in Maniam’s fiction contain dense description of the estate lifestyle. Like R K Narayan and his Malgudi, William Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, Thomas Hardy and Wessex, even V S Naipaul and Trinidad, Maniam writes most compellingly about the Kedah he knows so well as complete insider.

In Maniam’s second novel, *In A Far Country* (1993), the main character is Rajan, a successful business executive in the real estate and construction industry. For much of the novel, Rajan is undergoing a form of mid-life crisis. However, he is really most

convincing when he reminisces over the plantation community of his boyhood. His memories are overwhelmingly negative. Thus he recalls a permanently aggrieved mother and a father sodden with toddy for most of the days and nights, a grim picture of “limp helplessness.”(19) The rubber estates themselves were manifestly nothing like the fabulous mythological kingdoms uncovered by earlier Indian explorers in prehistoric times across the Bay of Bengal. After arrival in Kedah, the immigrant father feels trapped, helpless, impotent, condemned. Like other familiar Maniam characters, he cannot find a home in this new land.

“... I thought I would find heaven. But people can be wrong. A man can be wrong. The price has to be paid. I am paying it with blood. With all this suffering ...Why must there be suffering? We suffered there in India. Now there is only suffering. No escape like the last time.” (20)

Even by the age of 13, Rajan, who is one of eight children, yearns to escape the “the bareness and harshness of my surroundings.”(21)) Not even wonderfully mysterious rituals like *Deepavali*, or stubborn, captivating characters like Mani the goat and Muniandy the smoke-house attendant, can dampen Rajan’s resolve to leave, firstly by voracious reading, and then through formal schooling.

It is undoubtedly the case that the depressed, deprived nature of the labouring life on a typical plantation estate of the 1950s made it, indeed, a world to transcend. (22) For Maniam, it was fundamentally “stifling and sick,”(23) but he has also been able to affirm that the response of the estate working class “provides interesting possibilities for defining what the human personality is all about ..I see much potential in these people..”(24) Moreover, like V S Naipaul and the Indian community over in Trinidad, Maniam found that “actually to write, it was necessary to go back,”(25) in this case to the Kedah estates of his own childhood sensibility. One instance of the human potential of small town/estate life is to be found in the early (1976) story entitled “The Eagles,” which records the daily escapades of amiable young Ganesan and his gang from the estates around Sungei Petani during the 1950s. Ganesan goes about the green walls and multitude of wooden bungalows of the New Indian Resettlement Village, delivering bundles of laundry on his bicycle, buying little things on credit at Ah Chong’s shop, never missing the Tamil film screening each month on the Thye Eng Estate, and generally negotiating a living between the laundry and “the big house.”

But the physical settings of Maniam’s fiction stretch well beyond Kedah, to the island of Langkawi where he taught for a while, and on to the the urban metropolis of Kuala Lumpur, in a suburb of which he now lives. Langkawi features prominently in “The Aborting”, a story published in 1986. The two main characters, Mary Ling and Nathan, plan a romantic interlude in a spot remote from the national capital and “the protective distraction of city living.”(26). Mary Ling calls Langkawi a “fabulous place,” while for Nathan, who had lived there on the island before, it is “a place after my heart.”(27) At



first, famous landmarks around Langkawi serve to occupy their time happily, as does the “pristine, mythological” vegetation of the jungle and padi fields nearby. But the natural beauty of Langkawi cannot mask for long the deep personal differences between the two holidaymakers. The gentle, considerate, even tentative Nathan finds that he cannot match Mary Ling’s restless activity and quest for control in human relationships. Both their holiday and their friendship end at precisely the same moment. Mary Ling, in fact already finds a new male companion on the very boat that ferries them back from the island to the mainland.

In the story “Haunting the Tiger”(1990), however, the dense jungles of this ‘fresh, green land’ (28) furnish a crucial landscape. In this deep and wonderful story about the search for identity of a second-generation Indian immigrant, young Muthu tries to break from his immigrant father’s paternal influence, and become part of his new country. He goes with his friend, “Pak Zul” to catch a tiger in the jungle. He is surprised when Pak Zul tells him that the tiger is, in fact, all around him in the natural environment and the spirit of the land. But Muthu refuses to wear the tiger’s stripes, a fact which leaves him somehow empty, and troubles him until the end of his days.

### **Memory, Dream, and Imagination**

Both of Maniam’s novels, *The Return* (1981) and *In a Far Country* (1993), can fairly be viewed as reflections on the attempts by migrants from India, the ‘Big Country’ across the Bay of Bengal, to put down roots in Malaysian soil, and to make some sense of their

new place. In *The Return*, the prism and vantage point remains culturally Indian. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that much of the plot constitutes a hymn to Indian ethnicity, a place of memory and nostalgia where the then young Ravi had never been, but only heard about from older relatives or observed with awe in wondrous, transplanted religious festivals and rituals, of Ponggal, Thaipusam, and Deepavali, the Hindu festival of lights. (29) Truly Emmanuel Nelson has observed that the “haunting presence of India” lies at the core of all diasporic fiction, together with the ‘anguish of personal loss’ that India represents. (30) The evocation of a family’s distant but glamorous past on the sub-continent provides dramatic, ironic contrast to the grim conditions where Malaysia’s Tamils actually lived on the rubber estates near Bedong. And while distant, unseen India evoked a mystical admiration, the actual process of migration from India carried a far less salubrious hue. In ‘Ratnamuni,’ Muniandy recalls that he ‘did not come to this Ma-la-ya straight’ and hints at displacement from his familial landholding back in South India (31). Rajan’s father from *In a Far Country* recalls that the only significant event in his entire life was his original “escape from India to Malaysia.” (32) However, there was nothing heroic about the sea journey, which was rather something akin to a passage through hell. As the father related:

“The ship we came in was crowded and foul. The hulls were rusted.

When I drank water from the taps there was only the taste of rust.

And the human dung - all over the place. The men not even closing

the door. The door too rusted to be closed. The women with just

the saris over their thighs, to hide their shame. Sometimes no water

even to wash, to flush away the human filth.”(33)

There is no more substantive symbolisation of an Indian past in all of Maniam’s prose than in *The Return*, with the character of Maniam’s grandmother, the woman who became known as Periathai, or Big Mother, the pedlar who had ‘a firm gait in her walk’(34) and a hump in her back, so symbolic of endurance, that eventually osmosed into a terminal tumour. She was a woman of magnetic qualities. Indeed, for the youthful Ravi (the narrator based roughly on Maniam himself), the determined, self-reliant Periathai took on mythical proportions. Bravely, Periathai tells Ravi never to let anything break his spirit, but she also fails to establish legal ownership of the piece of earth she occupies in Malaysia, for she had “no papers, only a vague belief, and a dubious loyalty.” (35) The story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said’s view of post-colonial narrative as “the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.” (36) and reveals, in Joyce Carol Oates’ strong words:

..... how powerful the instinct is to tell a story, to have one’s story told, to be somehow transformed by the story of one’s life told by another, and published, and read; how deep the yearning is to interpret one’s life as, not mainly accident, as most lives are, but as a coherent narrative, with a supporting cast, set in a real, vividly recalled time and place. This instinct to memorialise is at the heart of writing, and the complex of bittersweet sensations we call homesickness is the predominant emotion.” (37)

## Institutions

Then there are the institutional landscapes of laundry, plantation, schoolroom, university, home, nightclub, and coffee shop. Of these, school has been a key institution in Maniam's creative life, befitting a former teacher and representing the possibilities of systematic, structured learning, of upward social mobility, of self-actualisation, and most importantly, of escape even during the late British colonial period. Of particular moment were the schools of boyhood memory. In *The Return*, Ravi first attended the Tamil-medium primary school on Riverside Estate near Bedong. There he found Murugesu, who turned out to be more a seductive magician than teacher. He found the Tamil Primer with its wondrous stories of elephants, deer, snakes, mongooses, dogs, and cats; and he found the "lines of curving, intricate Tamil writing" that "unfolded an excitingly unexpected and knowable world." (38) After a year, however, Ravi was sent to the English-medium school in Sungei Patani, with its colonial stone architecture, efficient Chinese clerks, silent rooms, rows of desks, square-lined exercise books, and ubiquitous pictures of daffodils. Above all else, the English school of the late colonial era was the domain of Miss Nancy, the teacher who was to guide Ravi through the remainder of his primary education, she of the intoxicatingly fair complexion, raven hair, frilled skirt, starched blouse, and a voice with a "raucous, imperious edge." (39) Miss Nancy was obsessed with fantasies like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and also with discipline and bodily hygiene. Her school-room centred Ravi's life. Order, cleanliness, and individuality became his defining characteristics. For Ravi, the worlds of school and

home began to lurch dramatically and disturbingly apart, and he came to view his Indian domesticity with disdain, employing negative terms like “darkness,” “futility,” and “primitive,” (the last is an adjective that appears twice in the relevant portion of the text).

(40) When his father, Naina, eventually agreed to Ravi’s request for a tooth-brush, the Chinese shop-keeper cannily observed that Ravi would be “a real Englishman now.”(41)

When thrashed by a Tamil laundry-supervisor for talking with some visiting English children, (and thereby challenging one of the unwritten rules of the *colonial* caste system), Ravi resolved in one dramatic moment of definition to escape from Bedong. “I turned away from the God who ruled my people.”(42)

School rooms themselves return as key locations in the story called “Removal at Pasir Panjang”(1981), where the rebellious girl-pupil, Li Hwa, challenges and then accepts the authority of her solitary teacher, Nathan, and in “We Make It To The Capital”(1984), where a group of teachers fantasise about an escape from their marginal remoteness at Langkawi.

Home becomes the inescapable location for the narrator of “A Hundred Years After”(1995). He is a retired academic whose career, despite initial promise as a cross-cultural anthropologist fired with patriotic ideals, has not, after all, amounted to much. Indeed, he now regards his educational achievements to be no more than “dead illusions”. (43) Symbolically, he gathers up all his files, seminar papers, and dissertations, and burns them in a kerosene tin in the backyard, before reversion to an

ageing domesticity with his spouse that itself equals a slow death from tedium, emptiness, and silence. The story is a very sad meditation on futility.

In the title story “Arriving”, from Maniam’s 1995 collection, it is at the neighbourhood coffee shop that Krishnan debates the meaning of the term *pendatang* with the other characters, Mat, Wong, Teng, and Francis Lim. At first, it would not seem likely that a term meaning “newcomer” or “recent arrival” in Bahasa Malaysia, Malaysia’s national language, would disturb such old, good friends who, it is said, “were connected, web-like, to a round marble table that reflected the turning fan and the still glaze of the tea pot.”(44) However, the emotional turn of the debate does seem likely to ruin this friendship, especially between Krishnan, who is ethnically Indian, and the “indigenous” Malay character, Mat. While Mat and Krishnan are no longer on speaking terms at the end of this story, his other friends at the coffee shop try to encourage Krishnan to a more optimistic view that life itself is, for everyone, a continuous process of arriving. Krishnan is not entirely convinced.

### **Mind and Personality**

K S Maniam usually writes within the realist genre, though he is not afraid of stylistic experimentation. Dreams and flashbacks frequent his prose. In his first published story, "Ratnamuni" (from *Malaysian Short Stories*), he employs interior dramatic monologue to convey the whole story, and he repeats this technique in the one-act play *The Sandpit* (1987). There is, too, a discernible metaphysical strain to his work. As Maniam himself

relates it, his literary works try to link the “precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality.” (45) Indeed, in successive interviews about his work, he has expressed a quest for the absorption of an individual self, or selves, into a larger, transcendent whole. (46) A profound sense of the vanity of earthly things permeates the recent story, “A Hundred Years After”, and in this case, academic things. As outlined above, a university teacher coming to terms with retirement contemplates the state of his career, his marriage, his home, and life in general. Eventually, he ritualistically and symbolically burns his dissertations, articles, and conference papers, convinced by the ephemerality of it all.

Rajan of *In a Far Country* is a Malaysian Indian who has come out of a remote estate world and achieved success in business. Rajan is defined as a “house and property owner, with a solid bank account”(47)), but he also has a decidedly reflective bent. At the outset of the novel, he is undergoing a kind of mid-life, mid-career crisis, shut up in a favourite room in his house, obsessed with his inner self, shunning both food and the company of his family, yearning for some transcendental light above and beyond mundane communal and material preoccupations. The novel offers another return to Hindu verities in the quest for a mystical light that is beyond and above all earthly existence and travail. Again Rajan asserts:

"I see the light. It is the light of pure  
living. It is there shining all around and into  
me. There is no ego, no self-interest, no

loyalty to all the people I've known; only  
the desire to contain that light within me and  
to take it out into the world. For it is the light  
of intelligence, not the darkness of the limited  
mind." (48)

Like a key character, Naina, in *The Return*, Rajan has begun to turn from worldly success to spiritual enlightenment, though not, he hopes, as a reclusive form of escapism. In fact, the transcendental theme of darkness into light is there from the very first chapter of *In A Far Country*, when the middle-aged Rajan goes into a bright room to begin his self-analysis. It is likewise significant that, at the end of the novel, Rajan has managed to achieve a reconciliation with his spouse, indicative of the efficacy of human action on an individual, microcosmic level as contrasted with a broader social or national realm. This view of domesticity offers rather more encouragement than the despondent retirement of "A Hundred Years After."

A distinctive characteristic of Maniam's recent fiction is his conscious effort to adopt a female persona. Thus "Booked for Life," the second story in the latest collection entitled *Arriving ... and other stories* (1995), is a lengthy, bitter-sweet reflection on a woman's life-time of dedication to the academic profession and its students, and the interior consequences of that dedication, namely an inner longing for personal fulfilment. There is something of a voyeuristic dimension to the portrait, even though the vantage point of the story is consciously and well-intentionally that of the woman herself. Outwardly,



Mary Lim is the strict, fastidious product of a formal Malaysian Chinese upbringing. Once a young student of literature at college, she is an utter bookworm, painfully self-conscious and coltishly inexperienced in the ways of the world, and especially of the other gender. Her strong reaction to familiar experiences of sexual jousting and harassment from fellow male students, that “male tribal chorus” (49), makes her extremely vulnerable to the gentle, warm charm of Sureshwami, a law student. Then, when Suresh inexplicably avoids her, she goes in search of him, first to the Law Faculty, eventually to a run-down flat in a derelict part of town. She is no longer, as she likes to believe, “a woman very much in charge of herself “(50) but has become locked into a relationship with a man she idealises, in the face of a host of contrary evidence. The consequent marriage almost immediately disintegrates. However, the legacy of this wishful behaviour is a son,

Michael, who behaves in traditionally masculine ways reminiscent of his father. Mary alone brings up her son, dedicating the remainder of her love and youth to him. She is a woman with tortured past, full of tragic personal experiences, who has endured in spite of all the hardships. She would rather live a lonely life than compromise her ideals any further. Mary’s story is told in flashback over a period of fifteen years, with plenty of interior monologue on her part. Maniam vividly describes her strong and upright character, together with the love and hate she harbours. Reassuringly again, it becomes clear by the end of the story that Mary’s problem has been with one man, Suresh, in particular, rather than the whole of the masculine species. Ironically, it is Michael’s search for a new father-figure, and the appearance in their lives of the male teacher, Tan,

which ultimately offers Mary the prospect of a replenished future that departs significantly from her past.

### **Margins and Shadows**

To give voice to people who dwell in the shadows and on the margins of life remains one of Maniam's abiding concerns. He has sought to compose literary works that, as he wrote in the Preface to *Sensuous Horizons*, "would liberate the inhabitants of the shadows from their fugitive existence."<sup>(51)</sup> Poor, illiterate, oppressed estate workers are one such group of people, and so, as suggested in "Booked For Life", are women who must dwell in the cages of domesticity and convention. "Ratnamuni" may fairly be said to exemplify the former group, while the subject of women and their roles is taken up in the stories called "The Rock Melon" and "The Loved Flaw," which can be taken together, since while the setting, plot, and characters are the same, the vantage point is quite different. The setting for both tales is a domestic one involving a triangle of husband, wife, and resident sister-in-law. The husband and sister-in-law are in a passionate, covert, adulterous relationship, both in the evenings when the wife is innocently asleep upstairs, and in the two hours of the morning after the wife has gone to work. Because the sister-in-law is relatively confined in spatial terms, keeping largely to the kitchen and living room, the relationship somehow goes on, undetected, for a decade. The rather sad and seedy narrative is first told from the perspective of the husband in the story titled "The Rock Melon". He is a supremely complacent, self-indulgent, deluded sort of fellow, who describes himself as honest, attractive, and even decisive. <sup>(52)</sup> He claims that his adultery somehow makes

him more appreciative of his spouse (53), and blames the sister-in-law for any consequent tensions in the household. Ostensibly, he is in control of his domestic space. However, a quite different perspective on this household occurs in Maniam's rewritten version of the story called "The Loved Flaw", where a female vantage point is juxtaposed to the male's, and the husband is shown to be the dependent one in a relationship which the woman views as a process of self-assertion. Viji, the sister-in-law, affirms:

"I won't be humiliated anymore. I've taken the first steps.

I won't live in the shadow of a family...Women can break out of anything."(54)

However, it should be noted that in neither version does the proper, innocent wife give expression to *her* perceptions of the triangle and its implications. To that extent, she remains dutifully in the shadows, without even a given name.

A quest for female identity is the theme of "In Flight," a dramatic monologue originally written in 1993, published in 1995, and narrated by the androgynously named "Sam" (who it turns out is a woman with the given name of Sammantha). "Sam" is a sophisticated, self-assured person. "Of course, I look after myself," she says, "A woman has to if she doesn't want to be treated like dirt." (55) Readers become aware right off about "Sam's" self-esteem and self-sufficiency when she boasts about the "rich, soft and caressing" timbre of her voice, and about her capacity to "bring home the bacon"(56),

unlike her rather more conventional mother who is “all over the house, every minute of the day.”(57) Ostensibly a self-portrait of a beautiful, flirtatious flight attendant who attracts men only to swat them away like flies, “In Flight” is in fact about a metaphysical journey of one female in search of human perfection. The character of ‘Sam’ is engaged in an existential quest for authentic freedom, or says she is. Of course, the story has its humorous moments as when Sam reflects on how Western female tourists “love a tan,” reflecting that “I could do with a bit of untanning.”(58)

Social freedom may also prove illusory for women. The title character in “Mala”(1985) takes the opportunity of marriage by choice in order to escape an existence of drudgery and gossip in a rural village, and take up a life of promise and excitement in the metropolis of Kuala Lumpur. She could have remained in the countryside, with the whispers provoked by her burgeoning beauty conveniently silenced by an arranged marriage. Instead, she bolts to a prospect of better things. However, marital life in the big city turns out to be no bed of roses, as Mala is drawn inexorably into her husband’s entrepreneurial culture of materialism, consumption, and superficial appearance. In effect, she becomes scant more than an adornment to her husband’s office, an object for her husband’s prospective male business partners to ogle. Naturally, she is aghast at having merely leapt from one kind of fire into another.

## **Conclusion**

While his cultural roots remain in a small town and adjacent rubber estate on the north of

the peninsula, K S Maniam has explored and revealed a range of Malaysian landscapes in his prolific output of fiction. There are the physical settings stretching from Bedong, where the memorable short-story character, Muniandy, stayed all his life, to the island of Langkawi, and on to the urban metropolis of Kuala Lumpur. There are the landscapes of memory, dream and imagination, most notably of the original 'Big Country', India, of the ancestral sea passage across the Bay of Bengal, of wondrous religious festivals and rituals, and of a faraway Britain where a character like Ravi received an education of opportunity. There are the institutional landscapes of laundry, plantation, schoolroom, university, home, nightclub, and coffee shop. There are the interior landscapes of mind and personality, whereby main characters seek to reconcile personal longings and perceptions with mundane external realities. Finally, there are the landscapes of the margins and the shadows, where dispossessed human beings dwell and warrant a voice. Through all these settings, Maniam has furnished a vital and authentic Malaysian mosaic. The undeniable beauty and wealth of landscape in a physical sense, though, has not been able to transcend a profound, haunted sense of cultural loss, and of never having arrived at a secular alternative.

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