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Alienation from Nature and The Role of Forgotten Tradition in Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* and K. S. Maniam's *Between Lives*

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at Keris Mas' *Jungle of Hope* (1984) and K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives* (2003) and discusses how humanity's alienation from nature gets different treatments by these two prominent Malaysian writers. This estrangement resonates with current environmentalism as it is seen as complicit in conditioning humanity's thinking that they are not a part of nature, causing them to take the anthropocentric and utilitarian attitudes that contribute further to environmental woes. Alienation from nature is to a large extent, the reflection of the environmental conditions in which the writers find themselves and the different phases in the country's environmental history, in which the texts are placed. Keris through *Jungle of Hope* delves into the onset of this alienation, focusing on the trauma felt by Malay peasants, caught between environmental realities and tradition. Maniam through *Between Lives* also delves into this rift. He, however, offers a way to heal this rupture – by going back to cultural and religious tradition. Indeed, forgotten tradition is reclaimed and revived in both texts but Maniam seems to foreground forgotten tradition as a way to heal this estrangement from nature. Both texts nevertheless, serve as valuable resources for thinking about alienation and its effects on humanity; and the immense capacity that humanity has to amend their relationship with nature.

Keywords: Malaysian literature, Postcolonial ecocriticism, Alienation from nature, Forgotten tradition, K.S. Maniam, Keris Mas

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INTRODUCTION

Humanity's estranged relationship with nature is usually understood in the sense that humanity is 'detached', 'cut off' from and 'out of touch' with nature. This sense of disconnection is reflected in many different

forms of modern, industrialised lifestyle, from having little contact with nature to being obsessed more about the latest technology than nature. This estrangement is also replicated in the commonly-held view that humanity is apart from nature, causing humanity to take the hubristic and utilitarian attitudes that contribute further to environmental woes.

The alienation of humanity from nature owes its intelligent discussion from the Marxist tradition (Eagleton, 2011, p. xii). Indeed, Marx was an early critic of this estrangement. When Marx wrote "*Economic and Philosophical Manuscript*" in 1844, he revealed his concern with the problem of human relationship with nature. Under capitalist modernity, humanity under the conditions of industrial labour suffers from a four-fold alienation: from nature, from the products of their labour, from other people, and from themselves. This alienation is further reinforced by the privatization of land and the making of all things into commodities, cutting humans off from the land and the freedom to co-evolve with it. This estrangement is what Foster and Clark have singled out as the "metabolic rift" between humans and nature (2003, p. 188) which reconstructs nature as an alien "Other" (Layfield, 2008, p. 88) and perpetuates anthropocentric and utilitarian thinking and attitudes towards nature.

Keris Mas (1922-1992) represents a prominent voice in Malaysian literature. An avid observer, recorder and commentator of economic and socio-cultural changes that affect the Malays, Keris' corpus of

works comprises five novels, ten collections of short stories, a memoir, and about 200 critical essays, covering topics on writing, literature, culture and nationalism. Critical examination of Keris's works hardly explores the environmental aspect even though some of his works, for instance *Jungle of Hope*, engages in environmental themes which are as indispensable as his varied Malay and Islamic-centred themes. I believe that *Jungle of Hope* offers a critical account of alienation, which, to this day, has had a bearing on the ways of thinking about some of the environmental issues faced by the nation.

A prolific and versatile writer, Maniam writes in all of the major genres of the Malaysian English literary tradition: poetry, plays, short stories, and novels. To date, he has written numerous critically-acclaimed and award-winning collections of poems, short stories, plays and novels that look into the Malaysian Indian community. Scholarly writings and criticisms on his works however, have mainly centred around his first two novels: *The Return* (1981) and *In A Far Country* (1993). His third novel, *Between Lives* (2003), delves into the theme of attachment to land, and the challenges and hurdles that accompany this overpowering process. This theme has characteristically run through most of his works, but I believe that this concern is dealt with more thoroughly in *Between Lives* than in his other two novels.

Aided by the interplay of memory, history, and forgotten tradition, Keris delineates the onset of alienation and

how the protagonist tries to cope with it, whilst Maniam deals with the outcomes of alienation and the possible ways of healing this rift. Tradition, other than the usual understanding of the handing down of practices from generation to generation, is often regarded as the opposite of modernity, usually associated with Westernization, industrialization, science, secularism, individualism, democracy, and rationalism. In non-Western nation-building, tradition validates things in terms of their fit with the history and identity of a society, whereas modernity validates things by comparison to other societies, usually European and American (Rhum, 1996, p. 351; Andaya, 1997, p. 391). In postcolonial nations, tradition is usually revered, reclaimed and revitalized extensively following independence since colonialism had disrupted cultural traditions and imposed European ways of thinking and organizing society (Ciaffa, 2008, p. 121). Some traditional beliefs, ideas, behaviours and rituals however, tend to be dismissed as impediments to progress and modernisation, thus forgotten or abandoned, especially by the younger generation. Modernity however, has not replaced tradition, and traditional ways of knowing and perceiving the relationship of humanity and nature continue to be the basis of human experience. Keris Mas and K.S. Maniam tapped into and revived these forgotten traditions through their treatments of alienation.

Jungle of Hope

Keris Mas wrote *Jungle of Hope* (hereafter, *JOH*) based on his memories as a youth growing up in Pahang, coupled with extensive research of colonial history. These were clearly utilized by Keris to reconstruct and critique the environmental damage produced by colonialism, particularly the alienation of Malay peasants from their land. Set in the 1920s-1930s in colonial Malaya, *JOH* traces the life of a traditional Malay rice farmer, Pak Kia, who is forced to move from Ketari to the jungle of Janda Baik when a disastrous flood destroys his land. At the same time, the British grant a permit to British-backed companies to buy the lands in Ketari and its adjacent areas, including Pak Kia's land, for conversion into a sledge tin mine that would ultimately inundate and destroy them. Villagers are asked by the agents of these British-backed companies to sell their ancestral lands in Ketari with the option to relocate to Janda Baik, a nearby frontier area. Forced by the impending environmental disaster, Pak Kia reluctantly sells his land. His family and he suffer a lot of hardships to clear the forest of Janda Baik and set up a new rice field.

The settings in *JOH* allude to real locations and past events in Bentong, Pahang. Ketari, Janda Baik, and Benus are all adjacent areas around Bentong. Janda Baik, the main setting in which *JOH* takes place, is a small idyllic village town in Pahang, Malaysia. Founded in 1932, Janda Baik is surrounded by thick rainforests and cool rushing brooks and waterfalls. The flood that affected Benus in 1926 and

the displacement of the villagers that led to their relocation to Janda Baik, were resurrected in *JOH* to highlight the perils of colonial capitalist enterprises to the Malayan environment and how these changed the relationship the Malay peasants have with their land. The colonial authorities, keen to exploit the natural resources that were abundant in Malaya in order to fulfill the needs to industrialize Europe, facilitated British investments in tin-mining and rubber plantations. Land was quickly earmarked for mining and plantation purposes (Butcher, 1979, p. 15; Jomo, Chang & Khoo, 2004, p. 63). Rice cultivation, which was a major occupation of the Malays, was considered an insignificant industry due to the Malays' reluctance to be involved in commercial agriculture (Chai, 1967, p. 143). British lack of interest in improving the Malays' inefficient systems of irrigation and primitive agricultural implements further limited the growth of rice cultivation (Chai, p. 146). Subsequently, the Malays were forced to either sell their land or take up rubber planting. Those bent on cultivating wet rice were encouraged to do so as wet rice farmers would eventually relent to sell off their rice fields (Jomo, Chang & Khoo, p. 63). By the 1920s, having developed large tracts of land in Selangor, Perak and Penang for mining and rubber, the colonial administration set their sights on unoccupied adjacent territories that had not already been developed. Vast tracts of land in Pahang, Johor, Kedah and Kelantan were identified. Bentong in the 1920s was already part of this massive expansion.

The landscape depicted in *JOH* mediates many of the environmental changes caused by the colonial economic engineering. On his way to the new village to see Zaidi for instance, Pak Kia sees

*...two verdant rubber estates,
reaching up to the hills beyond.
In the estate bordering the village,
the rubber trees had grown tall and
leafy, forming a lush, dark expanse.
Each villager owned a few acres of
that dark green stretch. In the one
farther away, which extended half-
way up the hills, the rubber trees
were young, sparse and light green
in hue...(p. 6).*

The land that used to be dominated by forests is now dominated by planted rubber trees. What he sees marks the already wide-spread plantation-based colonial capitalism. Prior to colonisation, much of pre-colonial Malay society was organised around agrarian production at the fringe of forests. They either practised shifting cultivation or rice cultivation. Hill or dry rice cultivation predominated most rice cultivation until 1860s when wet rice cultivation gained prominence (Jomo, Chang & Khoo, p. 81). Most Malays were living at subsistence level, with no pressures to increase outputs or to exploit the environment as a commodity. The environment provides the basic needs that they need. They take only what they need from the land for their survival, which means that ecological change was generally

minimal, compared to the more extensive and intensive forms of land use enforced under colonialism. This relation is not merely a physiological labour between the Malays and the natural world but also a cultural one. The environment and its richness provides the basis on which traditional lifestyles and beliefs are constructed; it holds the family together, and it is around land that the social organization of family and community revolves (Brookfield, Abdul Samad Hadi & Zaharah Mahmud, 1991, p. 29). As Kathiritambhy-Wells (2005) has noted, the relationship that the Malays had with the environment around them was one where “culture and nature are inextricably linked” (p. 7).

This traditional lifestyle continued to some extent during colonial administration, as exemplified by Pak Kia in *JOH*. Although restrictive new laws and regulations regarding the land were enforced, and tin mining and rubber plantation become the order of the day, Pak Kia still works religiously on his rice field. In contrast, most of the villagers around him have opted for growing rubber. Enticed by the material progress that came with the new economy, more and more Malays sell their land and open up new settlements and/or grow rubber. Pak Kia, on the other hand, works even harder in the rice field (p. 8). At one time, when droughts affect his rice fields, Pak Kia has no choice but to tap rubber on Zaidi’s plantation. “Tapping rubber, for Pak Kia, was sheer hell. He yearned to return to his heaven, his ricefield” (p. 9). The rice fields, rivers and orchards were the world to him (p. 11).

JOH positions Pak Kia at the forefront of the changing environmental reality that is sweeping Ketari, which he unwaveringly resists. His resistance is echoed by a number of Malays in his village like Jusuh, who refuse to “work as coolies”, “clinging even more firmly to their old way of life”, to “their original rice fields and village”, which “they felt, were their last bastion” (pp. 62-65). This form of resistance has typically been propagated in colonialist discourse, resulting in Malays being stereotyped as indolent, lazy and unproductive (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1977, p. 95). Adas (1981) however, sees this resistance as a typical avoidance protest in pre-colonial and colonial Southeast Asia, by which “dissatisfied peasants seek to attenuate their hardships and express their discontent through flight, sectarian withdrawal, or other activities that minimize challenges to or clashes with those whom they view as their oppressors” (p. 217).

Through *JOH*, Keris stresses that such resistance is rooted in the rural Malay culture, which revolved around non-capitalist relations of production. The new forces and relations of productions that are taking roots in the land around him are radically different from the relations of production nurtured by the pre-capitalist Malay culture. This brings Pak Kia into conflict, and he resolves this by refusing to give up his land and his vocation. The capacity to be his own person in control of his labour with nature, without interference from manipulative external forces – is liberating to Pak Kia. In contrast, his fellow village men may be working on their land growing cash crops like rubber, but they

are subjected to laws, restrictions and manipulations by the colonial administration and the global market. Unlike Pak Kia, those involved in growing rubber have to rely on other external production factors in their labour. Keris highlights this through the hardship suffered by the villagers in Ketari when the price of rubber goes down and money becomes scarce (p. 231).

Pak Kia's long-standing relationship with the land has shaped his personal identity. To Pak Kia, an important aspect of his identity lies in ties to the land and the kind of labour he engages in. When most people in his village are lured by easy money gained from selling their land and growing rubber, Pak Kia chooses to stay on his land and endure hardships. Amidst the changing cultural and environmental identity of the majority of the Malay peasants at that time who are assimilating into the colonial capitalist plantation agriculture by growing rubber, Pak Kia intractably asserts his own identity by refusing to be alienated from his land and labour. Pak Kia's strong affiliation with his land is what Tuan (1974) refers to as a peasant's deep attachment to land, which is "compounded of this physical intimacy, of material dependence and the fact that the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope" (pp. 96-97).

The landslide at Kutu Hill, which causes a disastrous flood to Ketari, destroys Pak Kia's land beyond hope. To make matters worse, Ketari is also being threatened by "Tuan Pekok's mining ravages", the openings of a sledge tin mine that would ultimately inundate and destroy the land

(p. 48). Powerless, Pak Kia sells his land and decides to move to Janda Baik. This decision however, is made with the aim to continue with the subsistence lifestyle, to "...work hard to develop the land in Janda Baik into a village that replaces the one we lost" (p. 190). He is determined to see that the relationship that he has always had with the land would continue undisrupted, "living the Malay way" (p. 72). When most of his fellow village men are abandoning their tradition of rice planting, Pak Kia seeks to restore this culture.

In *JOH*, Keris affirms the role of the forest in shaping the identity of traditional Malay societies. When his land is destroyed, Pak Kia resorts to the forest in Janda Baik. The forest offers hope for Pak Kia to make a living and Keris invokes this hope by making it a site of refuge for Pak Kia, fleeing the onslaught of colonial drive for mining and plantation agriculture. While the colonial administration sees the forest as a resource for commodities, Pak Kia sees the forest as the provider of his livelihood and a marker of his identity.

Pak Kia's efforts to make a living at Janda Baik bear fruit. However, his autonomy in the subsistence living is underscored towards the end when he "yielded to Zaidi's and Jusuh's persuasion and promised to apply for land to plant rubber when the time came" (p. 306). Malaysia's subsequent history during and after colonialism indicates that Pak Kia's obstinacy is fragile and idealistic, that environmental change is inevitable, and that a return to a pre-colonial lifestyle is

not feasible. Keris seems to suggest that Malay peasants like Pak Kia are inevitably caught in this ferocious circle, doomed to the colonial economy subordination as well as the four-fold alienation from nature: from nature, from the products of their labour, from other people, and from themselves. *JOH* may well be Keris' effort to underscore the onset of the rift between the Malay peasants and their ancestral land, coerced into colonial capitalist economy that is set to create physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual distance from the land. *JOH* may also be Keris' effort to partially reclaim the Malay cultural and environmental tradition, forgotten and abandoned under the menace of colonial capitalist rule.

Between Lives

K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives* (hereafter, *BL*) centres on the lives of two Indian women in contemporary Malaysian society, Sellamma and Sumitra. Sellamma is an old, second-generation Indian woman who owns a beautiful piece of land at the outskirts of a city. The land that she treasures however is being eyed by developers for the proposed building of a condominium block and a theme park. Sumitra is a young, third-generation Indian woman working as a counsellor in the Social Reconstruction Department (SRD), assigned to persuade Sellamma to sell her land and move into a welfare home. Sellamma refuses to budge. Suffering from memory loss due to old age, Sellamma lives in her own world where the past is the present and the present is the past. As a result, Sellamma mistakes

Sumitra for her long deceased sister, Anjali. Sumitra finds herself swept along a tide of memories that change her life and her world view. Upon her death, Sellamma bequeaths the land to Sumitra, who is determined to preserve it.

BL spans significant phases in Malaysia's history: from British colonization to contemporary Malaysia. These phases, as depicted in *BL*, also chart the various social realities experienced by the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. Malaysian Indians represent about 7.3 percent of the total population ("Penduduk Malaysia", 2012). A non-homogenous ethnic community, nearly 90 percent of Malaysian Indians are of South Indian origin, brought into Malaya under the colonial indentured system (Periasamy and Lee, 2007, p. 6). The rest were brought in from Ceylon and North India to run the administrative, technical, defence and security services. Today, the Indian community in Malaysia, once largely a community of plantation workers, has become diversified economically, although they are still perceived as "marginalized" in socio-economic and political terms (Muzaffar, 1993, p. 21; Appudurai & Dass, 2008, pp. 8-12; Tate, 2008, p. 179; Manickam, 2009, p. 379).

The reasons for the marginalization of Indians in Malaysia can be traced to their immigration history. The middle of the 19th century marked the cultivation of cash crops in Malaya, especially rubber. Indian labour immigrants were brought in by the British on a large scale to work in the rubber plantations, especially during the period of

1911-1930 (Sandhu, 1993, p. 155). Pitted against the indenture system of labour recruitment which chained the labourer to low wages, harsh working conditions, and British manipulative regulations, the Indian community lived in abject poverty and was “deprived ... of the economic foundation necessary for a politically significant role” (Muzaffar, pp. 212-213).

Independence did not change the role of Malaya as the producer of rubber, further confining the rubber plantation Indians to a life of poverty although they gained benefits like education, health care, water supply, and electricity from the government’s developmental efforts (Muzaffar, p. 221). Political representations during and after independence were generally weak and ineffectual on the sidelines, failing to lobby the powers that be to address the marginalization of the Indians (Tate, p.180). The New Economic Policy (1970-1990), implemented in the aftermath of the May 13 1969 riot, sought to redress Tunku Abdul Rahman’s *laissez faire* attitude towards development which continued the economic pattern initiated by the British and neglected some pertinent social issues such as poverty, landlessness, and income disparity between the races in Malaysia. This action policy however, had helped to elevate the economic status of the other predominant races but not the Indians, contributing further towards their marginalization (Manickam, 2009, p. 146).

As descendants of migrants from India, the Indian diaspora in Malaysia practise an integral part of the Indian culture,

maintaining link with their ancestral home. The Hindu religion, the Tamil language, Indian films, music and the performing arts play a big role in helping them to maintain the Indian identity and tradition. This attachment however, has not deterred them from assimilating and blending into the multicultural and multiracial society that characterizes the makeup of Malaysia. After almost 40 years of independence however, and after the implementation of so many economic policies and strategies that are said to be oblivious to the plight of the Malaysian Indians, the socio-economic status of Malaysian Indians is still questionable, contributing to “a strong sense of alienation and hopelessness” (Jegathesan, 2002, “Alienated Malaysian Indians”).

The land central to the unfolding of events in *BL* belongs to Sellamma, a second-generation Indian woman. Her picturesque land is “valuable land...stretching from the laterite trail to the river and on to the fringes of a jungle...a bit of scenic country...” (p. 1). The land, which is referred to as a “settlement” during the colonial times, is passed down from her “rubber plantation parents” (p. 16). Living off the land her entire life, Sellamma’s father, Arokian, is given the land title by a “white *thurai*” – his British employer at the estate. As the British-run rubber estate that Sellamma’s father works at is no longer hiring workers, Arokian finds himself trying to make ends meet. The settlement fortunately is fertile and he finds himself working on the land, growing fruits, herbs, vegetables and rearing cattle, living a sustainable way of

life. He is respected by the community and is regarded as their leader. He also makes friends with the Malays and has an especially good relationship with Pak Mat, who assures him that “Our wings are here on the land, Arokian” (p. 184). His family is also “better off than the others in the settlement” as “the land was flourishing” (pp. 16-17). But the Japanese Occupation throws his family into hardships, coerced into supplying vegetables to the Japanese army. His family unit too, slowly crumbles after the Japanese occupation. His two sons leave the settlement to join construction works. His two daughters get married and leave the settlement. The uncertain political climate brought on by World War II, the Japanese occupation and British’s return to Malaya at that time leave a big impact on Arokian. In addition, the nationalist movement among the Malays is also escalating; Malay hegemony is becoming more and more relevant to the Malays. Plagued by a feeling of displacement, which typically characterizes the older-generation Indian diaspora who are still emotionally and physiologically attached to their homeland, Arokian and his wife opt to return to India. Sellamma and her youngest brother however, choose to stay on the land. When her youngest brother disappears and is taken for dead, Sellamma disappears for a few years before returning to her land, keeping things pretty much to herself. This goes on for many years until Sumitra comes into the picture.

Different from Sellamma, Sumitra has assimilated into the multicultural Malaysia.

She makes friends with people from the other races, receives good education, and epitomises the modern Malaysian woman. Sumitra’s father epitomizes the Malaysian Indian man who has worked hard to have a good social standing in the Malaysian society; “retired from a fourth or fifth ranking job in the local branch of some ministry – a job that brought him a substantial gratuity and a comfortable pension” (p. 9). Sumitra’s father’s success in some ways marks the socioeconomic success of post-independent Malaysia. This success however, comes with a price. Living in an increasingly secular and capitalist society, where material possessions, social ranking and urban culture dictate the order of the day, cultural tradition and religion have less and less influence in Sumitra’s daily life. Steering clear from saris and religious rituals like the puja and puberty coming-out ceremony, Sumitra has shed most of the religious and cultural values and rituals usually practised by the Indian community, much to the disappointment of her mother and grandmother (p. 80). Able to speak English, Malay and Tamil, Sumitra feels she is the right person to persuade Sellamma to abandon her land and move into the old folks’ home.

Shifting away from questions of attachments to the ancestral land, cultural dominance and assimilation foregrounded in his earlier novels, Maniam’s *BL* elevates the Malaysian land as sacred. To “be part of the earth” (p. 62) seems to be Sellamma’s mantra. Working on the land tirelessly, she reinstates the personal relationship one

establishes with the land through one's own labour, "Appa always said be part of the handle, and you'll be part of the earth" (p. 62). Sellamma's relationship with the land goes beyond the physical. Maniam offers this different mode of interpreting to interpret the land and its link to humanity, going beyond the secular and scientific realms.

For Sellamma, a vital aspect of her personal identity lies in ties to the land and the family history connected to it. The land is particularly relevant to her as family history and cultural tradition intertwine. As first and second-generation Indian migrants in Malaya, Sellamma's family retains their Indian identity by practising integral parts of the motherland culture such as the Tamil language and the Hindu religion. The Hindu religion especially, plays a defining role in governing the norms, values and rituals practised by her family. Sellamma's family spends most nights reading the Ramayana: an epic Hindu scripture central to Hinduism that teaches the duties of relationships and the ideal characters for father, servant, brother, wife and king. The Ramayana, according to Arokian, should be read so that they "feel the magical plentifulness of the land, and to treat everything that grew (on the land) with the greatest respect" (p. 108). The Ramayana song also becomes the family's anthem. Sellamma's father is also likened to Rama while her mother is likened to Sita. The allegorical reference to Rama and Sita serves to foreground Sellamma's family's origin and ancestral ties to the motherland. Rama and his wife,

Sita, were exiled to a forest as a result of his stepmother's greed to install her son, Bharat, as the King. Without complaining, Rama and Sita live in the forest for fourteen years. Similarly, Sellamma's father and mother were exiled, albeit voluntarily – separated and distanced from the homeland. For many years, they make a living out of the piece of land they settled to, in Malaya.

Many aspects of the land are ascribed with religious identities and rituals that Sellamma's family used to practise. The Sacred Rama-Sita grove serves to highlight one of the important aspects of the Indian diasporic tradition in Malaysia: creating and/or building sacred places of worship similar to the ones found in their ancestral land. Sellamma's family is no different. Sacred groves, such as the one that sprawls over Sellamma's land, has its origin in India. The sacred grove institution in India is very ancient and dates back to the pre-agrarian hunting-gathering stage, before humans had settled down to raise livestock or till the land (Malhotra *et. al.*, 2001, p.6). A time-honoured means of biodiversity conservation, these groves are similar to what is now referred to as natural sanctuaries, where all forms of living creatures are under protection. Dedicated to a certain deity, no one is allowed to cut any tree or plant, kill animals and birds, or harm any form of life in the sacred grove area. Ancient Indian texts have many references to sacred groves (Malhotra *et. al.*, p. 12). In terms of religion, these groves serve to propitiate certain deities and/or ancestral spirits. These groves also

have a sociocultural function in that they provide a cultural space to the community as the common property resource where festivals, social gatherings and weddings are held. Sacred groves too, have an economic function whereby village folks collect and extract dead plant and animal material for fuel or energy. Lastly, sacred groves also have a political dimension in that they provide the territorial affiliation and village membership. As sacred groves serve religious, sociocultural, economic and political functions, they are invaluable in lessening human impact on the environment and ensuring uninterrupted ecological process (Malhotra *et. al.*, p. 18). By ascribing a religious identity to the Rama-Sita Grove, Sellamma keeps ties to the land, her family, and the Indian cultural tradition. Similar to the sacred groves in India, Sellamma's Rama-Sita grove are not excluded from threats. The first threat is during the Japanese Occupation, when Sellamma's family had to kowtow to the Japanese soldiers' demand for vegetables. This human threat was treated with determination and faith by Sellamma's family, "The Ravana's will be defeated" (p. 149). Like the story in Ramayana, human threats are likened to Ravana, who comes to the forest Rama and Sita live in, kidnaps Sita, and after many ensuing battles, is defeated by Rama. In the current setting however, Maniam foregrounds different kinds of threat: development projects and the erosion of the Indian cultural tradition. The Rama-Sita Grove in *BL* therefore serves to emphasize how the land not only provides for Sellamma's livelihood but also

the cultural space that gives her a sense of identity and belonging.

The river is also sacred to Sellamma, just as water is considered sacred in Hinduism. Water is of special significance in Hinduism because it is related to physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being. This explains why most rituals and holy places are usually found on the banks of rivers, coasts, seashores and mountains. To Hindus, water has spiritually cleansing powers, especially rivers, and there are seven sacred rivers in India, namely the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Bathing in rivers is considered sacred for it is believed to cleanse the bather off his or her sins. The river that runs through Sellamma's land is given the same religious significance. Swimming together with Sumitra, Sellamma reinforces the importance of the river to her family, "We always come here after working in the Rama-Sita grove. And after family quarrels or celebrations. More after the quarrels" (p. 64). The river therefore cleanses the whole family from physical impurities as well as spiritual ones.

Throughout the different phases of Malaysian history, from being colonized to the present day, Sellamma's land serves as a meaningful source of self-identity. Sumitra laments, "Why doesn't Sellamma see what I see? I mean the breaking off and the discontinuity" (p. 76). Sumitra's lack of empathy and sensitivity to the land serve to foreground the effects of rapid industrialisation in town areas, which causes the urbanites lose their link to nature.

Maniam underscores this rift by focusing on a bigger issue - humanity's lost link to the land and its sacredness.

In *BL*, Maniam ascribes religious identity to the land, endowing it with spiritual significance rather than scientific and anthropomorphic, showing a different understanding of the environment. Through Sellamma's filial devotion to the land, Maniam foregrounds the Indian cultural tradition – the forgotten traditional ways of knowing and perceiving the land, which continues to be the basis of human experience. In *BL*, modernity and rapid development may have elevated alienation, but they have not replaced tradition. When the tradition of maintaining sacred groves and rivers is quickly vanishing and forgotten, Maniam revives this, offering it as a way to heal the detachment of humanity from nature.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the notion of alienation is central in *JOH* and *BL*. Alienation is to a large extent the reflection of the environmental conditions in which the writers find themselves in and the different phases in the country's environmental history, in which the texts are variously placed. It is a four-fold process that overtakes humanity's relationship with the land; the effects are felt and dealt with by Keris and Maniam. *JOH* delves into the onset of this alienation, focusing on the trauma felt by Malay peasants, caught between environmental realities and tradition. Maniam through *BL* also delves into this rift. He, however,

offers a way to heal this rupture – by going back to cultural and religious tradition. Indeed, forgotten tradition is reclaimed and revived in both texts but Maniam foregrounds forgotten tradition as a way to heal estrangement from nature. Both texts nevertheless, serve as valuable resources for thinking about alienation and its effects on humanity, and the immense capacity that humanity has to amend their estranged relationship with nature.

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