

A Special Feature on the Late KS Maniam: Tribute and Interview



*Renowned Malaysian author and academic KS Maniam is known for many highly acclaimed works: the novel *The Return* (1981), the short story “*Haunting the Tiger*” (1996) and his play *The Cord* (1983). He died on 19 February 2020, at 78.*

*Maniam’s writing career spanned over six decades. His works were generally peopled by Malaysian Indians, and he created memorable male characters like Ravi in *The Return*, Rajan/Muthu in *In a Far Country* / “*Haunting the Tiger*,” Muniandy in *The Cord* and the unnamed husband (‘*Athan*’) in his short stories. His literary works also gave voice to women characters and raised women issues; Maniam has been called a feminist for his oeuvre. Maniam rode above such labels and often said: Maniam – Man-I-Am.*

Maniam was diagnosed with cancer a year before his death. On hearing of his diagnosis, the School of English, University of Nottingham Malaysia and KS Maniam's publisher Maya Press co-organised "KS Maniam's Writing: A Celebration" in Kuala Lumpur on 9th March 2019. This event was attended by the ailing KS Maniam, local literary lovers, academics, and writers to celebrate his legacy.

MMOJ is pleased to publish fellow writer Wong Phui Nam's commemorative speech at the event. This is followed by the transcript of the live interview with KS Maniam that was conducted by Malachi Edwin Vethamani on the same day.

Tribute to KS Maniam

Wong Phui Nam

KS Maniam may be the only complete Malaysian creative writer. Apart from his novels, for which he is best known, he has also published short stories, plays, and poems. I am not very familiar with his work other than the novels. Even these I read quite some time ago. So I shall rely on my memory as I shall say a few words as far as I can remember them. Maybe I shall go back to them for they are a worth reading again. For now, I hope my recollection is not too faulty. Maniam may feel that I end up a talking entirely off the mark. If this happens I stand perfectly open to being put right, especially by the author.

If you were to ask any Malaysian, who fancies himself or herself a reader, to name whom they thought were the outstanding Malaysian novelists, their answer would be a list several Malaysians residing in the UK, US, Australia, or elsewhere, who had at least one novel published in any one of these countries. You are not likely to hear KS Maniam mentioned often unless your respondent is among the few cognoscenti who know his books.

There is a twofold problem here. One is that many of us are still suffering, after sixty years of independence, from a colonial hangover. Anything produced in the West, especially original writing, must be better than anything local, 'local' being a pejorative term. By being written and published by residents in Western countries so-called Malaysian novels are deemed internationally recognized and therefore superior. This is simply absurd. These novels cannot be better or worse than local novels by the mere fact of their being written and published elsewhere than in Malaysia. They may be better known, but this is due to the more extensive literary support infrastructure in they have in these countries. These 'Malaysian' novels are a few novels among hundreds published every year. A normal and commonplace event if you are resident in these countries. The authors need not be singled out for adulation as Malaysians (wah!) who got published overseas.



Second, a Malaysian novelist, or any kind of Malaysian author, who resides permanently in a foreign country will not tell the story, give voice to the existential reality of the interior life of this country. His psyche, as it were, has been plucked by its roots from its nurturing environment which includes local history and geography, the food and games and general cultural ambience, and something else that may be called the spirit of the land. Maniam as someone who stays, in all these respects, is securely rooted. More than being merely Malaysian he, of course, has to have more going for him in order to merit our serious attention. This is in his deep and intense engagement in his writings with the fundamental survival, social, cultural, and, yes, spiritual issues that all thinking Malaysians ought to be concerned with. From his “Haunting the Tiger” (a short story) to *Between Lives*, not to mention his other stories and plays, he has created an interior view of a life, not only his but to more or less extent that of all Malaysians who, except the unthinking, are steeped in the reality of having to cope with these issues. It is this that makes him Malaysia’s most important novelist and I hazard a guess, in any language.

His major characters begin life in the grinding poverty common to early immigrant families. They study or work hard to escape their impoverished circumstances, but after having succeeded, they find life to be soul less sterile and empty in an environment where the primary conditions for getting on are determined by corporations and the state. They feel the need to return to their childhood roots and the land to find a centre. Their return is a spiritual search, a search for unity with the spirit of the land. This is problematic in that the land to return to is not the land of their ancestors of the distant past. Their immediate forbears had come to this land bringing with them a culture alien to it. So they are met with the almost impossibility of planting real roots in what is to all intent and purposes a hostile domain. Their gods have no home here. Still, the search for a centre continues.

The reality is: it is a yearning for transcendence. It is the endeavour of the individual to transcend his ego. In the writing it becomes manifest the ambitious attempt to achieve unity of realised self with the whole community people and the land. This leads into what appears to be a diversion on the novelist’s part into social and political analysis. It is really an attempt to present a vision of an inclusive, harmonious, spirit infused

society. It is not too much to claim that we exist to seek the integration transcendence and our everyday reality. Ask the mystics and saints of all faiths.

That is really why Maniam's work is important. Because of this importance, he ought to be better known. He has recognition among those who read Malaysian literature seriously, they are mainly academics. He has won an award for "Haunting the Tiger" and he has been honoured with the Raja Rao Award for distinguished work in Indian diaspora writing. And he is taught (or has been taught) in schools and universities in the country. Still he ought to be read more widely by Malaysians. Unfortunately, this country is a country that values mediocrity. We have pop singers who are accorded high official honours, nonentities elevated as national laureates, and an entertainer hailed as a genius. And of course, there are the Malaysians who go gaga over the likes Tash Aw, Tan Twan Eng and their ilk. Look home my friends and see what you have got. It will be well worth your time if you begin with KS Maniam.

Read him. Read with attention, with humility and obedience in that you open yourself to his words doing their work on you. You may agree or not agree with what he says but let him enlarge you, your individual self. Let his awareness be your awareness for a little hour. You will be the richer for it.

It will be confirmation that we are a nation of small minded people who cannot extend their sympathies beyond their faiths and origins and people who spend their entire time in worship at the shrine of the bitch goddess wealth and success, or who are both, if we allow Maniam to be forgotten. Maniam is a part of this nation's collective memory, a part in the shaping of its psyche. We will not feel it because of our indifference, but we will be sadly diminished if this happens.

Interview with KS Maniam

Malachi Edwin Vethamani



MEV: Good afternoon. Great to see so many of you here today. And that was quite a fiery message from Wong Phui Nam. (Laughter) A great way to start this conversation, I think. I was going to say, a lot of us have researched on Maniam and his works, and in this conversation maybe we'll spend a bit more time talking about the man himself, ya.

To Maniam: Your first publication was in 1968.

KSM: Hello? Ya. Can you hear? I suppose, as the poem 'Loneliness' (republished in this issue of *MMOJ*) did touch on, it is, you know, realizing (though you live with a family and so on, and also within a community) you are, in a very paradoxical manner, so much more at large with yourself, that largeness of you. It is this need to understand how this largeness exists within you that sort of drove me to poetry.

MEV: Okay. You know, when you started writing, many of us [are] often told, when we want to write, that we ought to read first. So I was just wondering what is it that you read and did that influence your writing?

KSM: I don't think [there are] any major influences, you know. Since we were exposed so much to British writing, English writing, I don't think, I won't, I can't say with any certainty [that] any single writer sort of influence me into say, Oh you should – you got something in you that yearns, that wants to come out, as is done with some of the poets in England. So you just went it all on your own.

MEV: Right. Discovering your voice is something that's not often that we've seen a lot of writers, but your voice has been quite distinct even from your first novel, *The Return*. And I was just wondering if you could share with us – because in *The Return*, you deal with both the ancestral land and also the imagined landscape that Miss Nancy gives the young Ravi in the story. You've been to both to India and to England, to India first as a young man. Could you share with us – was there a cultural shock, or how was that experience?

KSM: I think it was a struggle I felt, you know, I belong to them in some way, they belong to me in some way, but I think also that I was distinctly coming from Malaysia, different from them. And that'd be: I was on a cultural path which needed to be explored more and developed more by those living in Malaysia instead of saying 'Ya,' (all the time) 'I have come from India, it's that culture that influences me' and so on. How our – the culture that you inherited transforms itself and blended with the local landscape – I think that was more important.

MEV: Did you actually blend you think?

KSM: Well, I'm trying still. (Laughter.)

MEV: The powerful passage – actually I wanted to read an extract from *The Return*, but [Leow] Puay Tin said she would like to read it, so I said, okay, I'll read something else then – but the part where Miss Nancy takes the young Ravi to this imagined world, and your eventual arrival in England. How was that feeling, when you arrived in this...

KSM: I think when I saw the first dirty snow (laughter) I was all wrong about all of England. Some parts it was attractive, some parts they were quite... you know, I think one of the attractive parts was that to the dead poets and so on

MEV: Right.

KSM: You know, coming – in a way – directly into the spirit of poetry: that was important, yeah.

MEV: Right. I know you still have a very close link to – or to some parts where you have been, because in 1995 you return, and you went back – was it to Brinsford or... the place where you had your teacher training and you still seem to connect to some people there.

KSM: I connected with one of my tutors there, and so – but that's gone, cause you know, for many years I've not been writing to him, and sooner.

MEV: Oh okay. So looking at the land of the imagination and the land of the ancestor, and then this land in which you have been trying to find a space: how is the negotiation in these three places, how does that continue to...

KSM: Yea I think it does, because you see one of the things perhaps I neglected, and some of the other Indians in Malaysia neglected, was reading the ancient texts. Like you know, the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various other ancient texts which links you, you know, really to a much deeper and long-existent culture that we sort of we bypass, we ignore, or whatever, in a rush to join the Western escalator.

MEV: Mmhmm Yea. Is there anything that – you know, you work on the images of the tiger as a kind of a local, localized image of the country and the spirit of the country. Do you feel connection to any other images that you rework in your writing?

KSM: I think there were... the tiger is THE animal that's very fiercely connected to the land, so that's why I sort of chose [it] and that's why it is through it that I speak of our connection to this country.

MEV: Right. And... But those of us who have read *In a Far Country* and "Haunting the Tiger," we will see that you are actually very brave in the way you present the confrontation between Zulkifli and Muthu, and also Rajan. I just wondered, you know, in

a land of so much censorship, you actually present a very, very antagonistic relationship – conflict between these two men.

KSM: What does it mean?

MEV: Sorry, both *In a Far Country* and in “Haunting the Tiger,” so not many writers have done that – to confront our immigrant-ness as it were. And what you wrote in 1993 still resonates with us today: this idea of who is Malaysia, and who is immigrant, who gets to call whom what the labels.

KSM: Well, I think one of the things is that not a lot of people read KS Maniam. (Laughs) Two, because the indirectness in which I approached the subject sort of makes us, makes people feel that, you know, he’s not hammering this thing home, with ‘you must insist you’re born – you’re a part of the tiger, and you’re part of the land’. So the indirection helps to... it sort of seeps into the people and makes them connect with one of the main symbols of the country, which is the tiger.

MEV: Right. Yea, certainly the images provide the tiger a very – you almost paint the landscape, which also described as a mindscape, into a kind of different Gothic, going into the jungle, as it were, into a different kind of mystical experience. And *In a Far Country* has been described as experimental and difficult. Do you think that’s one of the reasons a lot of people, [especially] the younger readers, fear reading KS Maniam?

KSM: I think this... the word ‘experimental’ as we know has become too pejorative. But he doesn’t really need that great effort because you have a mind, you know, and you don’t know the reaches of a mind yet, do you? That’s why you go on sort of exploring and exploring that thought. So when people, when young people, say they want to reach or go to the further regions of the mind, then they have to read something that’s to help them get there.

MEV: Right, and talking about young people: You came up with a series of what has been described as young adult stories, yea. Was there – were you taking a break from serious writing, and writing the series... how did that come by, come into you?

KSM: No, you know, young adult fiction is quite serious in itself (Laughter) You see, sometimes when you go down, not to say going condescendingly down, you go to a different level and to – you must tune up your instruments of expression much more

sensitively and much more reachable, it must become much more reachable, so it is not at all that easy to get there. And in some of the... I think Sasbadi's book fair, some of the youngsters they actually approached me and said they do understand this and can I ask, and they asked questions about which part they didn't understand, and that's a good kind of rapport.

MEV: I think those books actually found themselves in many of the libraries in the country. Maybe I'll ask you a question which others may not have asked you. You've written so many stories, you've written plays, and now we're getting to read more of your poems. Which would be your favourite text?

KSM: I think that's always a difficult question for a good writer. (Laughter) Everything that you write is your favourite, right, because you put so much of yourself in it. (Laughter)

MEV: But if I force you to choose one... (Laughter)

KSM: You know, force always makes me turn away from the person. (laughter)

MEV: Okay, we won't go in that direction. We all have our favourites, yea, but I won't ask you that question again. But let us go on to another part, you know. Towards the end of Wong Phui Nam's message just now, he talked about the other writers and the different kinds of recognition that goes on. And you know, you were given the first Raja Rao Award before it was given to others like Edwin Thumboo and Yasmine Gooneratne. How important was that recognition that came for your contribution to the Indian diaspora?

KSM: I was merely pointing out the things, through my works, between Indians in Malaysia and Indians in India. That was all – I was not overemphasizing (MEV: no) the role that Indian Indians played on Malaysian Indians. You see I think that's where – I think we can't go over as to say they completely influence our lives. Because we have our own minds and culture informing in evolution.

MEV: Did it have any impact on your writing after that – reaching, getting this award?

KSM: No, no. No. (Slight laughter.)

MEV: Yea. Okay, one final question. I'm going to give a quote from Maya Angelou, she says, 'There is no greater agony than burying an untold story inside you'. Is there one such story inside you now?

KSM: There always are, but – I mean, I've got to re-enter the agony I suppose (laughter) to draw it out, you see. As you know that no child is born - unless it's caesarean (laughter) - without the agony of birth.

MEV: Okay. Thank you very much, KS (Clapping).

To the audience: later on KS will still be around so you guys can also get a chance to chat with him. Thank you.

