THEMES OF RECOGNITION AND REIFICATION IN K. S. MANIAM'S NOVELS

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In the novels of the Malaysian Indian K. S. Maniam, the contestation of recognition and reification forms the central tension in the protagonists' identity development as members of a minority community in the multi-ethnic landscape of Malaya/Malaysia. Each central character's conflict lies in his/her ability/disability to balance accepting ethno-cultural recognition on the one hand and contesting the reification that the Indian ethnic group subjects him/her to on the other (subsequently championing what Michael Sandel coins an "unencumbered" sense of self – a self that is "free and independent" from "the sanctions of custom and tradition"). This paper discusses Maniam's three novels, The return, In a far country and Between lives, to ascertain the extent to which recognition and reification are important themes in the award-winning novelist's corpus. Using the conceptualisation of recognition, reification and the unencumbered self, the paper investigates how Maniam's three Indian Malaysian protagonists, Ravi, Rajan and Sumitra, like most members of minority communities who are faced with the challenges of a multi-ethnic social landscape, challenge the ethno-cultural imposition that their own ethnic community subjects them to while realising the significance of culture towards a healthy sense of selves.

Keywords: reification, recognition, K. S. Maniam, unencumbered self, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the novels of the Malaysian Indian K. S. Maniam, the contestation of recognition and reification forms the central tension in the protagonists' identity development in a multi-ethnic landscape. Each central character's conflict lies in his/her ability/disability to balance between accepting ethno-

cultural recognition on the one hand and contesting the reification that the Indian ethnic group subjects him/her to on the other hand (subsequently championing an "unencumbered" sense of self). This paper discusses Maniam's three novels to ascertain the extent to which recognition and reification are important themes in the award-winning novelist's corpus. Using the conceptualisation of recognition, reification and the unencumbered self, the paper investigates how Maniam's protagonists, like most members of minority communities who are faced with the challenges of a multi-ethnic social landscape, challenge the ethno-cultural imposition that their own ethnic community subjects them to.

THE RETURN

K. S. Maniam's first novel, *The return* (1981), can be misread as a text that disregards the social reality of Malaysia as a multicultural nation. As the writer-critic Shirley Lim states, "An unknowledgeable reader may well believe Malaysia to be, even if pluralistic, an Indian-dominant nation, or at least not a Malay dominant country" (Lim, 2001: 132). Another critic asserts a similar sentiment by accusing the narration of being "so inward looking" that it disregards "the larger multi-racial society outside" (Tang, 2001: 278). In actuality, *The return*, as asserted in a previous study, is a vivid portrayal of life in colonial Malaya that depicts the major ethno-cultural communities, such as the Indians, Chinese and Malays, as living separately from one another (Raihanah, 2008). The lack of interaction between the communities creates a strong sense of isolation, which consequently colours the development of their identity. Such is the reality represented in the novel. As Peter Wicks observes, "communalism, the situation where an individual's ultimate loyalty and affection is given to his or her ethnic group, permeates the Tamil family at the heart of *The return*" (Wicks, 2002: 30).

When taken within the context of a plural society, as defined by Furnivall (1956), as one in which many ethno-cultural communities live in isolation and separated from each other within a singular political unit, *The return* is in fact a dramatic reminder of our historical colonial legacy, one that is filled with a prominent ethnocentric outlook on life. The novel narrates such an outlook through the lives of the Indian hospital workers who work and raise their families in Bedong, Kedah, a setting that is, at times, slightly removed from 21st century multi-ethnic, multicultural[1] Malaysia. Their daily lives are governed by customs and rituals that help create a kind of homogenous

"special country," "an invisible landscape" (Maniam, 1981: 13) separated from the rest of Malayan society.

Lim (2001: 132) may have a point in concluding that by juxtaposing the "loss of Hindu spiritual identity" against the forces of "English cultural assimilation, "*The return* escapes from dealing with the other pressing issues of Malaysian socio-political reality, namely, "the thorny, politically sensitive issue of race relations, national identity and nationalistic assimilation or non-assimilation" (Lim, 2001: 132). However, we are inclined to think that the portrayal of history of the Malaysian society as seen in *The return* is not done to sidestep any "sensitive issue" (Lim, 2001: 132). If anything, the novel forces readers, and Malaysian society in particular, to recognise the genesis of our communal mind-set, which consequently gave birth to the "assimilation or non-assimilation" (Lim, 2001: 132) conflicts of present-day multiethnic-multicultural Malaysia. Within the context of this paper, the reading of *The return* extends Roxas-Tope's (1998: 115) idea that speaks directly for the need to return to the history of the society to comprehend "(the) nation and a means with which to participate in its formation." In addition, the reading of the novel also takes into consideration the novelist's position as a member of a multiethnic, multicultural society in Malaysia who must contest individual aspirations in the face of communal and social demands (Raihanah, 2009).

Multiculturalism, as many detractors of the theory have stated, "distracts minority members from the quest for their authentic self by framing their destiny constantly in terms of its relationship to the majority race" (Sullivan, 1997: 46). In this novel, however, the minority is not pitted against the majority, but against themselves, largely due to the structure of the society at that time, as stated earlier. With a lack of intercultural engagement, the reading of the novel can identify a greater sense of reification (Fraser, 2000) that happens in a predominantly monocultural community. For this reason, we choose to read Ravi's efforts at distancing himself from the immediate cultural environment as his way of taking full "responsibility" (Sullivan, 1997: 46) over himself at the expense of the reification that occurs in his life.

Ravi's sense of self is subjected to constant belittling from his community. He suffers the pressure of cultural reification by his own ethnic group and, in particular, the patriarch, Menon. In one chapter in the novel, Ravi is ordered to enter Menon's home through the back door to collect the laundry. Even though Ravi holds some favour for his Indian culture, the misrecognition that he receives from Menon pushes him to develop a singular "asocial" (Poole,

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1999: 45) attitude towards family and community, which makes him believe that he can develop a self that is independent of "social contingencies" (Poole, 1999: 45). Examples of the reification that Ravi suffers can be seen in the way the patriarch Menon attempts to curb the movement of the lower class Indians within the estate compound and in the strong control Menon imposes on Ravi's formal education by discouraging him from furthering his studies.

Such cultural reification inhibits Ravi from recognising his cultural associations while finding his individual voice. He is curbed from moving beyond cultural boundaries and embracing a possible other, including a more western perspective, as introduced by his Caucasian teacher, Miss Nancy. Conformity is forced onto him given the cultural constraints and expectations of the estate Indians. It is these limitations placed by the ethnic group that urges Ravi to escape from the parochial environment into one that is more self-driven. With a new sense of self-awareness, albeit developed at a young age, Ravi begins to feel the need to carve out a space for himself. He begins to make a conscious effort at asserting his sense of agency within the family space. It is then that he creates an "imaginary room" (Maniam, 1981: 38) by drawing a chalk line on the floor to cut out a "cubicle" for himself. He is a young man who craves, as he admits, "for order" (Maniam, 1981: 37), and the act is aimed at getting the family to recognise his need for privacy. As he proudly states, "no one could step into that imaginary room...Once I stepped over the fictitious line I couldn't be disturbed" (Maniam, 1981: 38). This act of creating boundaries in his life, at a micro-level, is akin to what Anzaldua (1987: 3) defines as "border culture," the transitionary and "unnatural" state of existence that "distinguish(es) us from them" and that "define(s) the places that are safe and unsafe." Perhaps, the newfound "personal" "borderland," as Anzaldua (1987: 3) terms it, is Ravi's protective mechanism to safeguard himself from the continuous reification both at the family and community levels. Still, the private borderland, when fully developed and realised as Ravi gains maturity and self-confidence, is a double-edged sword that will ultimately marginalise the protagonist from the rest of the family and the Indian community.

Ravi disregards the importance Indian culture has to play in the formation of his identity. As he confesses upon returning home one day after a humiliating beating from Ayah[2] or Menon for his transgression into the "yellow territory," where the lower caste is not allowed to enter: "I don't know what promises I made myself but a grain of iron must have entered my soul for, from the following day, I turned away from the God who ruled my people"

(Maniam, 1981: 79). Ravi's need to "turn away" from his cultural heritage is not unlike Kennedy's (1997: 3) rejection of the "burden" of racial attachment and the need to embrace the concept of the "unencumbered self" that Michael Sandel problematises. Kennedy (1997: 3), quoting Sandel, argues that the unencumbered self is "free and independent" from "the sanctions of custom and tradition and inherited status, unbound by moral ties antecedent to choices." It is the freedom and independence from all that is culturally inherited that Ravi too embraces.

Ravi eventually becomes the thorn in the side of the estate community of Bedong because he asserts his individuality within a community that overtly reifies him. In so doing, he tries to move away from the restrictions imposed by the culture by exercising his agency at the expense of losing a place within the community. In attempting to exercise his sense of agency and in having, as Maniam (2001: 266) himself comments about the character, "unquestioning loyalty to whatever is new," Ravi eventually suffers a sharpened sense of marginalisation at the hands of his own community members. Subsequently, the creation of the borderland that began at his father's home early in his life has grown sufficiently to accord Ravi a place at the fringe of his own community. His need to recognise the "unencumbered self" has caused him to cut off ties with his ethnic culture. Although his sense of identity is still to be fully recognised, as it stands, Ravi is displaced. Even if the novel attempts to end on a positive note with the suggestion that Ravi has reconsidered his past "false" sense of attachment, the road is still long. Ravi, as this reading indicates, is still struggling to form attachment with his family and culture, having failed to recognise their importance in his life due to the reification he was subjected to. Without a sense of attachment to his family and ethnic community, Ravi's sense of identity is still incomplete. To quote Michael Sandel (quoted in May, 2002: 126), "there is no such thing as the 'unencumbered self' – we are all, to some extent, situated within wider communities which shape and influence who we are."

In many ways, Ravi's journey towards selfhood represents the polemics of the reification that restricts individuals from realising their potential outside cultural attachment. Anyone who attempts "cultural criticism" (Fraser, 2000) will suffer the damage of misrecognition. The cultural community is to be blamed for reifying collective identity to the extent that it disregards any sense of personal freedom and choice and, in so doing, alienating its members. As Arto Laitinen (2003: 18) states, the essence of a "good life" within the domain of recognition politics constitutes receiving the proper recognition, and the misrecognition experienced causes the individual

member of the community to be "further alienate(d)." Also, Ravi's narration, though it ends as the young man concludes his life in the rubber estates of Bedong, highlights the effects of reification on a person's happiness as an individual and a member of the ethnic community. To quote Laitinen (2003: 18), "human flourishing is not independent from the subjective views, so such bad experiences, if continuous and significant enough, suffice to make life less than good." The thematic concern of recognition and reification as seen in Ravi's developmental struggles as a young child finds a continuation in Maniam's second novel.

IN A FAR COUNTRY

In a far country was published almost 12 years after *The return*. Nonetheless, there are elements of continuity between the two works of fiction. Like the first novel, the second provides a microcosm of the country's social milieu as seen through the eyes of a Malaysian, albeit the complexities in issues and concerns are more intense in the latter narrative. In many ways, Ravi's youthful need for the "unencumbered self" and for detachment from his family and culture has materialised into Rajan's middle-age crisis. For that reason, Rajan's narration highlights greater intricacies than Ravi's, as the recollection of his past moves beyond the private realm of family and community into the public domain. It is in this domain that he comes in contact with individuals of different ethnicities and walks of life in his capacity as a professional in the land office.

The central conflict in Rajan's fractured identity is rooted in his underdeveloped sense of self. As critics have stated, "Rajan is really a blank with a lifetime of experiences" (Daizal, 2003: 20). Rajan's preoccupation while growing up had been on accumulating wealth and gaining social position to relocate himself to the "centre," or mainstream society. As a member of a minority community, Rajan's search for personal financial security or "credit to survive" (Maniam, 1993: 24) is in line with the needs of a former migrant community out to establish themselves in a new land. Remembering his childhood, Rajan recollects the moment he became "an aggressive individual out to make a mark in the world" (Maniam, 1993: 24). Rajan's ability to move out from the estates and build a business for himself is thus a mark of his success as a member of a minority in a Malay-dominant multi-ethnic society (Ramasamy, 2004). However, this need, as he admits early in the narration, has lost favour for him: "I've been, until a few months ago, a successful businessman with my own firm. But now I'm filled with a

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terrifying emptiness. Everything has come to a stand-still. It is as if I can't find the strength to go on" (Maniam, 1993: 25).

In focusing on the need for social mobility, Rajan has lost sight of the more important aspect, that of his sense of self. Such was Zulkilfli's misgiving when he invited Rajan to the jungle, although the former's position is not without politics. Zulkifli is the Malay character Rajan meets when working at the land office. As a member of the dominant Malay community, Zulkifli holds himself as having some authority over Rajan. He dictates and prescribes what he feels is required of a minority who wishes to belong to the country, which includes relinquishing all past attachments, particularly to the motherland, and relocating oneself physically and emotionally to the new land. As Zulkifli tells Rajan more than once, "You must discover (the country's) spirit as my people did" (Maniam, 1993: 93). Having said that, this study on Rajan's identity within a multi-ethnic society does not set out to showcase one community's domination over another. Nor does it set out to illustrate the lack of cultural commitment in a member of a minority group living in a multi-ethnic society. Such conclusions may be seen as hackneyed, albeit relevant. Discussion on Maniam's protagonist focuses instead on the issue of identity contestation for members of a multiethnic society that continues to challenge the boundaries of the "unencumbered" self in a social space that imposes reification.

Identity development and representation in a multi-ethnic society, as seen in Rajan's narrative, is constructed around certain conditions. The interpersonal relations between members of a society feed into the formation of an individual's identity, which is the basis of the dialogic formation of identity that Taylor (1994), Locke (1992) and Swidler (2003), to some extent, recognised. However, the self equally has a role in the formation of the identity. As Don Locke (1992: 2) clearly states, "awareness of self is the first step to understanding others." This awareness is the foundation of the individual's identity as he/she finds balance among the different competing demands on the self, including individual aspirations and collective expectations. In Rajan, the interpersonal sense of self is starkly missing, thus causing the central conflict in his life.

Rajan's reflections on his past are coloured by his detached attitude towards family and community. As he narrates, "during my most idle moments, when I'm off guard, events and people I had thought hardly worth paying attention to, come into my mind. My father's face and his last days in the estate house keep coming back to me" (Maniam, 1993: 3). It is this detachment that

creates a "fractured psyche" (Daizal, 2003) in the narrator. He did not understand his self worth, and he allowed others, including the imposing Zulkifli, to coerce him into accepting what they felt was his worth. It was only in retrospect that Rajan realises the fault, as he states: "I had been young and impetuous. I had thought too much of myself. I assured myself I was an individual set distinctly apart from the others" (Maniam, 1993: 132). Likewise, his lack of self worth and agency, specifically in the settlement episode, cause him to reify a fellow minority member, as seen in his relationship with Lee Shin. He admits to being "guilty" of "the arrogance of purpose" (Maniam, 1993: 161). As he says of the ill treatment that Lee Shin was subjected to, "I saw only what I wanted to see" (Maniam, 1993: 161). His low self-awareness caused him to remain unaware of the consequences of his action on others, including Lee Shin. Thus, it is the perpetuation of the fractured self and the continued detachment from social engagements that caused him to experience depression and chaos in his middle-age despite externally appearing to be successful personally and professionally.

In constructing a new character with interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts in Rajan, the author appears to challenge the notion of the unencumbered self. As Sandel elaborates, "obligations of solidarity, religious duties and other moral ties that may claim us for reasons unrelated to a choice" are "inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are – as members of this family, city or nation or people, as bearers of that history" (quoted in Kennedy 1997: 57).

Still, is being a "bearer of history" all that necessary? Maniam's third and latest novel appears to address that very issue.

BETWEEN LIVES

Similar to *The return* and *In a far country*, *Between lives* focuses on an individual's journey to better understand the self within and outside an ethnocultural space. At the outset, the central character, Sumitra, is a young social worker whose values are governed by her commitment to her profession. In terms of cultural sensibilities, Sumitra, like her grandmother and father, is a Malaysian Indian who exhibits a strong cosmopolitan awareness – to "pick and choose 'cultural fragments' from various ethnocultural sources, without feeling an allegiance to any one in particular" (Waldron, quoted in May 2002: 134). She remains detached from her cultural roots, much like Ravi and Rajan, and it is the disengaged self that she relies

on to remain apolitical in dealing with the multi-ethnic subjects in her profession. Sumitra is an individual who embraces aspects of city life and aspects of her Indian culture without necessarily feeling a sense of attachment to the culture. She may look Indian and speak the language, but in her "head" (Hall, 2000), she is an individual first and a member of an ethnic group second. Much like Ravi in *The return*, she oscillates between individualism and direct commitment to her community through the family; and much like Rajan, her unencumbered self allows her to function successfully in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia. In other words, she does not appear to exhibit any direct sense of commitment to the larger Indian community until she meets Sellamma, the older Indian woman whom she has been assigned to evict. The community, in turn, may not claim overt ownership of her as one of their own. This is the impression she gives Sellamma on their first encounter. Sumitra is accused of behaving "too much like the other people" (Maniam, 2003: 22) and is subjected to the reification of group identity that demands, as Nancy Fraser (2000: 110) has stated, that all members of a particular cultural group accept the "moral pressure" of being supportive of one's fellow community member, failing which, one becomes the other. However, as the two begin to develop a strong interpersonal relationship, Sumitra develops a sense of recognition for Sellamma's communal attachment.

The portrayal of Sumitra and Sellamma at first appears to represent different sides of the communal vs. individual divide. Yet ironically, they both experience what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1995: 216) categorises as "marginalization from both the ruling center and the established margin." Sellamma's need to retain the ownership of her father's land is not supported by the "established margin," the minority Malaysian Indian community. No one at first showed any support for her need to retain the land her father toiled upon during colonial times. Only later does Sumitra, and much later her parents and close friends, begin to lend support in ensuring Sellamma's success. Likewise the "ruling centre," or the state authority, remains unsupportive on the issue, allowing the media to play it out as the "selfish" act of an old woman who is preventing "people from living in such natural and wonderful surroundings" (Maniam, 2003: 229). Sellamma thus faces the conflict of hanging on to her rights as a citizen regardless of society's politics *vis-à-vis* a minority.

Similarly, Sumitra too undergoes marginalisation both by the "ruling centre and the established margin" (Minh-ha, 1995: 216) for helping Sellamma retain her land. Both the authorities and the public criticise her activities as

unprofessional. Sumitra's involvement is merely belittled as "selfish" and done to achieve a "personal ambition above public interest" (Maniam, 2003: 229). The "established margin," represented by her family, equally condemns her as self-centred because she appears to embarrass the family's position within the society. The common concern between the two women ironically breaks the differences between them and simultaneously make them the inappropriate other for society. Rajan struggles to create equilibrium between the unencumbered self and forming a social, cultural association, which is a lesson that Sumitra is exposed to through Sellamma. In narrating Sumitra's conflicts in adjusting to a renewed cultural attachment and Sellamma's right to remain on her land, the author creates an environment in which we get to experience the politics of identity formation in a multicultural society where heterogeneity[3] is no longer simply between ethnic communities but is also an integral aspect of an ethnic community.

The synergy between Sumitra and Sellamma in dealing with the land issue creates a transference of cultural commitment from the older generation to the younger. Thus, Sellamma's struggles to gain recognition for her ancestral land, which the current independent state refuses to acknowledge, becomes Sumitra's struggle too, as the latter sheds her public responsibility as a social worker and takes a personal interest to assist Sellamma in her struggle for public recognition. In narrating such an interdependent relationship between the two strangers, albeit fellow Indians, Maniam breaks the notion of the "imagined community" that Benedict Anderson (1983) introduces as well as the 'false security" of communalism that Stephen Sullivan (1997) highlights *vis-à-vis* multiculturalism. Communalism as presented in *Between lives* fosters a kind of kindredness that needs to be nurtured, and the land that Sellamma struggles to maintain becomes a symbolic representation of the nurturing of communal attachment in Sumitra. To reiterate Sandel's point as quoted earlier, Sumitra, in undergoing this renewed communal attachment, learns to recognise her communal solidarity and moral obligations for Sellamma specifically and indirectly for the minorities generally.

CONCLUSION: CONTESTATION OF IDENTITY IN RAVI, RAJAN AND SUMITRA

This paper sets out to investigate the themes of recognition and reification in K. S. Maniam's three novels. We would like to conclude the analysis with some closing remarks on the three protagonists – Ravi, Rajan and Sumitra – and their individual evolution towards a holistic sense of self. Despite the

obvious similarity that the protagonists share, i.e., being a member of the Indian community, each struggles with different aspects of his/her cultural heritage in the formation of a sense of self. Each protagonist undergoes a journey towards gaining some kind of recognition for his/her identity as an individual, as a member of an ethnic group and as a citizen of a nation. In *The return*, Ravi's journey is concerned with his development as a young Indian boy and a member of a third generation migrant community living in a plural society during the period of colonialism. *In a far country* portrays Rajan's journey towards appreciating his sense of self as a middle-aged Indian man and a member of a third generation migrant community living in a multi-ethnic independent nation. Finally, *Between lives* narrates Sumitra's journey in understanding her sense of self as an individual and a fourth generation migrant growing up in a multicultural independent nation. These protagonists are shown to struggle towards some sense of identity both at the private and public levels (Rex, 1996).

The analysis of each narrative demonstrates that ethno-cultural recognition is imperative to an individual's identity formation, the lack of which leaves individuals like Ravi, Rajan and Sumitra devoid of a cultural heritage. Nonetheless, excessive recognition of one's ethnicity can also lead to the reification of group identity, and Ravi's narration clearly suggests this. Moreover, ethno-cultural recognition is not the only prerequisite to inner stability. The individual still requires the space to develop his/her personhood, without which his/her sense of self will not be fully developed, as Rajan's middle age crisis demonstrates. Thus, the explication of each protagonist's journey towards a sense of self takes up the issue that cultural recognition should not be at the expense of the "erosion" of individualism (Sullivan, 1997).

The narrative of each protagonist's journey also presents the various acts of misrecognition at different levels of society, from a close one-to-one relationship to one that is more public and general, such as at institutional levels, and each protagonist chooses different approaches to respond to these misrecognitions. Some choose to consciously embrace their unencumbered selves, removing themselves from such dialogic relations and living solely for their personal ambitions. Ravi and Rajan are examples of this, although Rajan later retracts from this cultural isolation. However, such a choice does not end favourably, as the characters are left in a state of crisis. Others, as the analysis illustrates, choose to acknowledge the importance of recognition while also contesting the value of misrecognition imposed, as Sumitra and Sellamma do in *Between lives*. Still others try to challenge the one-

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dimensional perspective of cultural experience by urging recognition of the heterogeneity of cultural identity as seen in the efforts made by Sumitra towards the end of *Between lives.*

Consequently, this reading of the three novels brings to light the degrees of importance placed on ethno-cultural recognition and an individual's sense of self *vis-à-vis* a plural society, as seen in the first novel, and the multi-ethnic and multicultural society, as seen in varying degrees in the later novels. There is evidence of the promotion of cultural pluralism, where the ethno-cultural identities of individuals and communities are given their due public acknowledgement by members of the family, the ethnic community and society. However, there is also confirmation of the need to move on from a pure, culturally based identity to embrace a more cosmopolitan, individually based identity. It is in the balance between the two, ethno-culture and self, that the protagonists seek their true selves in the multi-ethnic landscape of the country.

NOTES

1. The definition of multi-ethnic and multicultural takes up Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's (2000) construction that places society's plurality on a continuum of heterogeneity.

2. *Ayah* is the honorific title given by the community to Menon, albeit the incident shows Menon's poor conduct.

3. See Paul Gilroy (2000) for a debate about heterogeneity within the African American community as an example.

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