

“Into the Light”: In Conversation with K.S. Maniam

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K.S. Maniam is a writer who has immersed himself in the fractured landscapes, fissured histories, and fragmented cultural experiences of societies and communities in transition – and of all who call themselves “Malaysian.” His works grow out of a consciousness of a world made up of layers of journeyings, the meeting of cultures and the heterogeneous results of their mingling. Born and raised in rural Kedah, the son of a hospital dhobi (laundry man) who with his wife and children also had to tap rubber to supplement the family income, Maniam writes about people on the move, those whose lives and memories have traversed boundaries and travelled vast distances and who, like his own

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grandmother and her three sons, along with the thousands like them who left India for Malaya in the early years of the twentieth century with little else than the will to remake their lives, must now cope with the change and confounding chaos around them. He is the first Malaysian writer to take up this theme. He has also taken it further than anyone else.

Over forty years Maniam has crafted an oeuvre that traces, with care and sensitivity to detail, description and dialogue, the possibilities as well as vagaries of diaspora, the power of the human imagination, and the impossibility – as well as undesirability – of returning to a pure and whole culture. His narratives catch us at that unstable point when who we were and are is mutating into who we are becoming. Driven less by the mechanics of plot than by the intricate recesses of his characters' inner lives, his stories draw us into palpable hinterlands, both actual places and territories of the mind, in which he locates his characters and their dreams, desires and inchoate longings. He is the author of a substantial body of works: three novels, *The Return* (1981), *In a Far Country* (1993) and *Between Lives* (2003); numerous collections of short stories, including *Plot, The Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories* (1989), *Arriving... and Other Stories* (1995), *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia* (1996), *The Loved Flaw* (2001), *Faced Out: Six Stories* (2004) and *A Stranger to Love* (2018); two plays, *The Cord* (1983) and *The Sandpit* (1992); and several essays that reverberate with the preoccupations of his fictions. Now 76, Maniam has shaped a vision that makes a virtue of multiplicity and inclusiveness, establishing himself in the process as a leading literary voice in English in Malaysia, if not its most revered novelist.

In 1980, he joined the University of Malaya as a lecturer, retiring as an Associate Professor of English in 1997. Reserved and soft-spoken, and although he exuded an air of being slightly remote, Maniam was always affable when approached. I should know. Before I became his colleague in 1990, he was my supervisor when I wrote my MA dissertation on Raja Rao. But not for him the rounds of lunches and teas that used to characterise social life in the Department in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, as this interview will make clear, behind that taciturn exterior is a certain aplomb and robustness of spirit, and a steely resolve to live and write by one's own rules.

His debut novel, *The Return*, is in many ways a classic and has been made a set text for the Literature in English component for Malaysian secondary schools. It was also the writer's attempt to reach for a greater understanding of his own, displaced identity and the struggle to create his freedoms while acknowledging, with respect and affection, the value and validity of the world from which he came. Reading this and the works that followed, we recognise not only the complexities of ourselves but also the dynamics of the societies in which we live. Maniam's stories are about place and the reinvention of identities that can never be other than the hybrid realities that have shaped them. Doing the transformative work that literature does, they revolve around the question, What

does it mean to be Malaysian? That question, to accommodate Maniam's expanding literary vision or what he here calls one's "creative intelligence" has, in his latest collection of stories, transmuted into, What does it mean to be human?

In the following interview, conducted over email in September and October 2018, Maniam discusses his early years, his commitment to his vocation (which he tells us he has come to regard as a *sadbana*, or spiritual practice), his place in the "national" canon, the institutional conditions under which he writes and why they cannot diminish his writerly spirit, his unsparing view of chauvinisms of every kind, and his hopes for his and his nation's future.

*I wanted to organise my questions around my main interests with regard to your work – the question of nation and identification, about where writers position themselves in relation to the canon – but also about your creative practice and your views on the writing life. But let's begin with your personal biography. For someone who has written about the importance of remembering and understanding – of "returning," as it were, to – the past, there is very little on record about your early childhood and youth, about all those things that are said to have "made" us – the kind of family we were born into, the parents we had, the siblings or relatives that surrounded us, the gamut of sounds and stories and sights and tastes and smells in the air we grew up with. I know it's been said that your first novel, *The Return*, was largely autobiographical, but you've written very little directly about your formative years as a period of your self-fashioning as a writer. In an early interview that you gave, in 1992, you had yourself rejected any notion that your novel was "literally 'auto-biographical,'" that though it drew upon your Kedah background, you had not "used the events that [had] actually happened to [you]" (Yong 65). I'm thinking here also of what the writer Colum McCann has said – that writers don't write about what they know, they write about what they want to know. Could you tell us a little about your early family life, and about what it is that you wanted to know about your past through your writings?*

There is little to add, I must say after a fuller reconsideration, to the biographical facts that already appear in *The Return*. I grew up to the loud quarrels and vulgar swearing, cries and howls of child and wife beating and what I call the Ramayana of want for food, bed space, money for playthings and, in my case, a silent cry for individual space and privacy. I got a little of these when I was on duty in the dhobi shop in town, allowing me to write poems. When exam times came, I stayed back in school to mug or study with a friend in his house in the hospital compound.

I did use what I knew, that is, my family and neighbours in the long labour line, as material for the novel but I invented the ambitions, conflicts, desires, emotions and thoughts of the various characters. I wrote the novel when I was a lecturer in the university, when I'd already written poems and a few long short stories. There was nothing specific I wanted to know, but I did want to test myself

with an extended work like the novel, to discover my literary skills and also question whether I was heading in the right direction, both in my outlook on life and in my writing. The poem "Full Circle" at the end of the novel expresses my anxieties about these and perhaps indicates where I could go in my future works.

From 1962 to 1964, you were on scholarship in Wolverhampton for a two-year teacher training programme. This must have been a transformative experience for you – a young man of twenty arriving alone in England, a world removed from the small-town Malayan life that had shaped you. This was not the first time though that you went abroad; you'd gone to university in Mumbai (then Bombay) to study medicine but had decided you did not like medical studies, returned and left again, this time for England. Did you win a medical scholarship? From what I understand, the bright student of your generation either wanted to become a doctor or a teacher. Was there pressure on you to take up medicine? How would you say your experience of being away from home in India was different from that in England?

My first girlfriend's mother sponsored me, I now like to think, to send me far away from her daughter! But, seriously, medicine and teaching were indeed prestigious and desirable. The doctor and teacher were admired, respected and even feared as they played important roles in our lives. My friend and I, whom people called "the inseparables," decided on the more prestigious, falling under the spell of popular imagination rather than pressure. But after I'd started pre-med college in Bombay, I recall sitting on a railway seat and going into a deep and painful self-questioning and soul-search. I came out realising I was deceiving my family, friends, girlfriend's mother and, most importantly, myself. My inseparable friend decided to return with me though I told him I thought he was more suited to becoming a doctor. Unfortunately, he died in a motorcycle accident a year after we'd been back.

Going to India was like going to a memory-familiarised land. My grandmother, my father, my inseparable friend's midwife mother, who were all born in India, had told us stories about it. We were going to a culture from which ours had originated. So we weren't entirely strangers to India but my friend's relatives and others did treat us like distant cousins come from a newly independent and fascinating country. In other words, they immediately saw us as Malaysians. In a way that was my first sense of belonging to my country. Once we quit college, we saw more of India by wandering all over Bombay, but also when we went to stay with my friend's relatives in Kerala, which looked more like Malaya. I wasn't into tracing my roots, so I didn't go to Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu, from where my grandmother, father and uncles had come.

My English experience was different in that I was going to our ex-colonialist's country, impressions of which had filtered down to me through teachers' descriptions and the literature we'd read or studied in school: Shakespeare, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days*, Dickens, Wordsworth,

Sherlock Holmes' thrillers, Edgar Wallace, P.G. Wodehouse and, of course, the comics, *Beano* and *Dandy*.

School had given us a good grasp of English, so I didn't fear not understanding or being misunderstood in England. I was excited about treading the bits of England that English writers and poets had trod in their homeland.

I also got exposed to a wider range of English people when I did my teaching practice in the English schools. It was ironically thrilling to teach Shakespeare to Grammar School Form 3 students, cream of the cream, and to expound philosophy to impressed teachers in these schools. Whatever awe I might have had for the English as our colonial masters was replaced by a more down-to-earth acceptance of them as ordinary people like everyone else in the world. This was also the impression I carried back from my summer holiday tours of northern Europe, particularly of the Dutch, French and German.

In retrospect, do you feel that those years in England were an enabling and productive experience for a writer in the making? The period leading to and immediately after 1963, when Malaysia was formed, would have symbolised hope and infinite possibilities for the nation. Was this also when you felt you could begin to think of yourself as a writer and about a literary career?

Being in a land with a rich and complex literary tradition certainly made me feel I was getting into an activity that would challenge and perhaps help me contribute to the budding English literary tradition in the newly formed Malaysia. So I did a walking tour of the Lake District just to get a feel of what Wordsworth and Coleridge, living in such a beautiful natural landscape, must have felt for their own country. I later visited Shakespeare's cottage and of course saw a couple of his plays, together with other teacher-trainees, in Stratford-upon-Avon, and the marvellous performances of Laurence Olivier and Maggie Smith as Othello and Desdemona in a Chichester Theatre when I did a play directing course there. I also saw a couple of other plays in The Strand theatres. What I'm saying is that writing in its various forms began to be a reality rather than remain merely as a distant desire.

Seeing the racism that has crept into Malaysian social and political life over the years, I've often been made homesick for the ideal Malaysian society that was so alive in Brinsford Lodge, the Malayan Teachers' College. We never thought of ourselves as Malay, Chinese or Indian. We never trampled on each other's sensitivities. Food was *halal* in the college dining hall except for two tables, which served lamb and pork chops. We celebrated each other's festivals, the women students from the dorm or house who served at the formal dinners on Hari Raya, Chinese New Year and Deepavali wearing the sarung-kebaya, cheongsam and sari. A few of the all-British academic staff wore the baju-seluar, mandarin coat, or kurta-vesti on these occasions. What also nostalgically stands out in my memory is the United Nations World Day event in the magnificent Salisbury

Cathedral. I, the Malaysian flag carrier, wore the songkok, baju-seluar and kain songket; my companion on the right wore the sarung-kebaya and companion on the left the cheongsam, truly an enduring Malaysian image!

That was one of the infinite possibilities that could have been realised in Malaysia, instead of the racial divides, hostility and suspicion I see, which I've tried to pursue in my fiction especially in the novel, *Between Lives*.

I'd always been a writer without consciously thinking of myself as one. I wrote poetry to seek temporary relief from the poverty and the harsh realities around me, or find alternative worlds during my teens. So, I continued to discover more of my writing self, mainly through poetry during my Brinsford days. My inseparable friend's death provided me with an immediate impetus. I mourned his death in a form of cathartic ritual by writing forty-four sonnets in the traditional, Shakespearean and my own forms.

In all your fictions and other writings, you make it very clear that it is Malaysia that provides the founding narrative of arrival and settlement. Even though India is that land of deep dreams and memory, especially for your first-generation immigrant characters, the story you tell is always a Malaysian story. What do your ancestral connections mean to you and to your writing? To what extent does "the idea of India" shape or continue to shape your imagination?

A writer is shaped by the place and times into which he is born. These often steer him towards his special areas of interest and commitment. I lived through changing times before and after Independence and the formation of Malaysia, which made me very conscious of what was going on in the country and happening to its peoples. Being freed from colonial rule meant discovering your own identity and destiny. My sojourns in India and England further intensified my own sense of identity and also my commitment to writing.

It is always a Malaysian story also in the sense that I want to see and hopefully help in the formation of a truly Malaysian consciousness and society. As I said, I caught a glimpse of this society in the Brinsford community, where race, colour and cultural differences didn't matter, only the sense of belonging to the country did. But as I observed the country take more racist and cultural directions up to 1969, when the May 13 riots broke out, I was utterly disappointed, if not devastated. Perhaps that was why I wrote *The Return*, which was published slightly over a decade later, to understand and perhaps discover, at least from the perspective of the migrant Indian community, the feelings, dreams and hopes it had for the country.

My ancestral connections came into play here through the stories that had come from my grandmother, our neighbours, a travelling story-teller and uduku player, who all evoked a powerful sense of our Indian origins and past, and also through gramophone records and the dramas that brought various Indian epics to life. You must also be aware that there are always cultural and evolutionary

memories at work in the writer. That is why, I think, Naina, Ravi's father, in *The Return*, experiments with fashioning his own gods with the river clay of the land, so that he could feel a more intense sense of belonging to the country. That's why, Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer-Destroyer, who also figures in the novel, came to me when I was writing the novel. And that is also why the novel ends with the poem "Full Circle," which questions cultural and national loyalties.

I didn't form or write under a fully-fleshed idea of India. I wasn't even conscious of one. I think the writer's imagination brings into his fiction what is needed or what has been inherited through the various memories mentioned above.

I asked the preceding question also because India laid claim to you in a sense when in 2000 the Samvad Foundation in New Delhi announced you as the first diasporic Indian in the world to win the Raja Rao Award. Later recipients have included Edwin Thumboo of Singapore, Yasmine Gooneratne of Australia and David Dabydeen of the UK. Could you tell us what winning the award for making an "outstanding contribution to the literature of the South Asian diaspora" meant to you? What impact did it have on your writing?

I suppose the "Mother Country," which I call India in my novel *In a Far Country*, was concerned about its children who had been taken by the British colonisers to what had then been Malaya. On the morning of the award day, I delivered in the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi my paper titled, "Writing from the Fringe of a Multicultural Society," which details how the Indian migrant had been reduced to someone far below a second-class citizen. An Indian academic, very surprised, even startled, exclaimed, "I thought we put you in safe hands!"

I don't think the award had any impact on my writing. I've never allowed praise, criticism, or cultural claim, Indian or otherwise, to distract or detract me from my writing. So, I've continued to follow whatever and wherever my writing has taken me or takes me to, aware of but not allowing the reading public and critics here and abroad to influence what my writing should be.

You met Raja Rao in person in Kuala Lumpur in 1987, when he'd visited the Department of English at UM. I'd met him the year before in Singapore at the 1986 ACLALS conference, to which he'd been invited as a keynote speaker. I'd gone to see him at RELC, where he was staying, to ask him a few questions as I was writing my MA dissertation on his first novel, Kanthapura, as you're aware. I'm embarrassed to admit it but my memory won't allow me to recall much of that meeting. Coming face-to-face with the great man himself must have left me blabbering and dumbstruck in equal measure! But I do remember him being deeply attentive, as displaying a genuine interest in what I was saying, or trying to say! You, I am sure, had a more memorable experience?

I gave him a copy of *The Return* the day before I took him out for a ride and for lunch when he came as a special guest to a conference organised by the English Department. He'd read it through during the night and commented that he found it "precise and poetic" when he signed my copy of his novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. I suppose it also made him want to see Indians in Malaysia. So, I drove him down to Morib, passing rubber and oil palm estates. We didn't stop to go into any, as he had a late afternoon appointment to catch, but I remember that he asked me to stop at a two-row-shop town. He gazed past the shophouse fronts and said it felt a little like being in India. Later, after we'd had a vegetarian lunch in the Morib rest house, he talked about Brahman and Atman as the universal and individual creative impulses, and about silence, I mainly listening, as I'd been directed to write a piece on him for *The New Straits Times*. I think my talk with him gave me a writing uplift. It must have made a deep impression on my subconscious for I've begun to delve more deeply into the nature of silence in some of the poems I've been writing lately.

I'd like for us now to come back to your writing. Who were the writers you were drawn to reading in the early years of your writing career? Who are you reading now? Was there a book that made a difference?

My early writing years began, as I mentioned earlier, in my teens. I had an avid, even voracious, reading appetite that I shared with my inseparable friend. We often competed to finish more than two or three books in a week. We read Wallace, Jerome K. Jerome, Wodehouse and the thrillers his midwife mother handed down to us after she was done with them. But I also read those hardly borrowed books from the school library – almost all the novels of Dickens and Thackeray. I read the English canon, European and Russian novels in translation, and the so-called "New Literature" titles during my undergraduate days. I wasn't drawn to any particular writer but to several: Lawrence for his near mystical passages, Woolf for her personal metaphysical leanings, Conrad for his intricate and potent symbolism, Faulkner for delving daringly into perverted minds and Fitzgerald for his boundless belief in human resourcefulness, to mention a few.

I'm not reading anyone right now. In fact, I haven't done so for some years now. The last novel I read was Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. I suppose I've reached what I like to call a reading burnout. In any case, most writers don't bother to read other writers' works, not so much out of fear they will impact their own writing in some way, but because they're not as challenging as the works he or she's into. I've reached that stage and if I may egotistically say it, the only book I'm reading is the one I'm writing!

Early, or at any time else, in your writing career, did you feel you had to unlearn or relearn any influences to find your voice, your own distinctive way of telling stories, of remaining faithful to

your vision of the world? I am talking about what makes the short story or the novel or the play yours, as well as the influences – literary, philosophical, intellectual – that you bring to bear on your writing.

I don't think I was influenced by any single writer at all as I read widely and taught different writers during my tutorship days and my academic career. If I was influenced, it was probably in my poems, when I wrote my cathartic poems to mourn my dead friend in various sonnet forms, or later by Wordsworth, Keats or T.S. Eliot, whose sepulchral voice I heard on a phonograph when sitting outside my Brinsford Lodge dorm. I put poetry writing aside for a while but when I took it up again in the late 1960s, I found these influences had faded away.

I remember how I discovered my writing process and through it my own voice. I was between jobs in 1975, so I did an extended and intensive stretch of writing. I wrote six stories during that experimental and, in a way, apprentice period, writing from morning to lunch, then continuing, after a nap break, into late afternoon when, utterly exhausted mentally and physically, I would put down my pencil and call it a day. I found I had to draft and redraft a few times before my emerging voice spoke more firmly in those long short stories. I thoroughly edited each one of them, becoming my own harsh critic, before putting them away. This became my rather demanding writing process, which allowed no influence to creep in and let the nuances of my own voice speak in its own expressive ways.

Though I read Western philosophy widely, particularly in the university, I found it too dry or intellectual to have any influence on my own works, or to even help me find an attitude to my writing. Though I'd found my writing process, I never let it make me complacent so I was, and still am, experimenting with various aspects of writing fiction and, more lately, poetry.

I am intrigued by what it is that moves writers to write. How do you choose a subject to write on? Or is it true that the story chooses the writer, and not the other way round? When you start writing a story, do you have an idea, however vague, of where it might go, of what it's going to be about? Or does the story write itself, with you recognising it – what it's all about – only at the end?

My subject is already chosen for me by the times I live in, which generally is the story of Malaysia, so I only have to struggle with how to present the discoveries I make of the various communities, their prejudices, conflicts, dreams, social tendencies and political vision. Finding a specific or particular story isn't always easy but there is something that always leads me to it.

This something, I've discovered from decades of writing, is an intelligence that isn't the measurable IQ. I call it the creative intelligence, which is not to say it surpasses the latter, only that it works or manifests itself in a different manner.

Some writers treat it as the muse or inspiration, which may appear suddenly or haphazardly and send him or her into a frenzy of writing. My experience says this isn't quite so.

I have a daily-self and a writer-self. The writer-self is always behind the daily-self, perhaps at a low-key level, but registering, noting and absorbing what is happening around the daily-self and perhaps even transforming it, on a fundamental level, into a fictional form. I mentioned when I recounted my meeting with Raja Rao that we talked a little about the Brahman and the Atman, the universal and individual creative impulses or consciousness. The connection between the two isn't accidental but a definite reality. Neurologists have shown through scanned images how similar the synapses in the brain are to the stars and planets in the various galaxies or universe. This similarity I see as a total, active awareness, much more expansive, boundless even, than the empathy that is often said to aid the writer in identifying with all sorts of people and to enter complex situations.

So, the writer doesn't consciously find a story, I mean by merely using his intellectual capabilities, nor does he depend on some accidental appearance of a character or strong feeling that plunges him into a story. It is that immeasurable intelligence or active, boundless awareness that nudges me into a story, novel or play.

That nudge enters the imagination and fleshes itself out as the various thrusts of the story or novel. I've always thought a writer must experience the story as he writes it, otherwise it will only exist as a consciously or cerebrally made up thing, as a lifeless piece of writing. It becomes a literary exercise, which only entertains the intellect but doesn't affect the entire being, which is what I feel fiction should do. As someone put it, fiction becomes a pretty woman all dressed up with nowhere to go.

Language or words come in the last stage of the writing process. It's there like a shroud, which a reader soon forgets as the fictional experience draws him into it, and actively engages him in its various events and developments.

Once the work is completed, the writer pulls back from the experience he has created and now views it in its literary form with a harsh, critical eye or mind. This is when he edits, rewrites and even rejects what seems not to have that experiential liveliness I mentioned. I let a fine excess or a suggestive understatement sometimes add more life to the narrative.

Nadine Gordimer's assertion that "all writers are androgynous beings" rings true of stories such as "Mala" and "The Loved Flaw," where you enter your women characters' experience to try and see their world from their eyes. Commentators have been appreciative of your sensitive rendering of the female voice. Do you wait until the right voice is there before you start writing a story? When do you know it has to be male or female, the first person or third person? Most

of your stories – and certainly I notice that all of them in your latest collection, A Stranger to Love – are written from the first-person, male voice or perspective.

We're born from the union of the male and the female, the man and woman. So we have both biological qualities in us. The hormones testosterone or oestrogen make us either male or female, and the ordinary person accepts this gender and goes about the business of living.

But it's different with the writer. His, as I said, is an all-encompassing awareness or intelligence and is involved in bringing into the light what lives in it. This awareness is more inclusive than empathy, so the writer can switch from the male to female, masculine to feminine sensibilities with greater ease. Therefore, I'm not surprised when readers or critics label me a male feminist.

I write mostly from the first-person perspective because I believe the reader must experience the fiction, not just read it for some intellectual entertainment and move on. A male reader must experience whatever conflicts, confusions and feeling the woman goes through to retain or ultimately lose her independence. What other point of view can do this as powerfully as the first-person?

The stories in *A Stranger to Love* use the male voice or perspective, I think, mainly because some kind of balance is being restored. Since I've written so much of the female experience why shouldn't I right the record and allow the male voice more room? Or perhaps it's the man who's becoming more beleaguered and the writer's total awareness or intelligence wants me to highlight his plight!

What was it like being a student of the Department of English at the University of Malaya in the 1970s? I imagine it was nothing like it is now – which is not altogether a bad thing! Seriously, though, the seventies were a particularly tumultuous decade in the history of the department, with the so-called nationalist elements in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences accusing the English Department of being an anti-national, colonial stooge. This was also when the National Cultural Congress of 1971 met to formulate for the first time a Malay-dominant national and cultural policy for the nation, following the riots of 13 May 1969. What do you vividly remember of that time?

I came to the university as a mature student, that is, after teaching five odd years in Kedah schools, with great expectations. I'd been writing poetry, particularly when I taught in Pulau Langkawi for two years, and sent a couple of poems to Lloyd Fernando who was then editor of *Tenggara*. Though he didn't publish them he sent back, in reply, a copy of the journal and a hand-written note, saying something like, "This is the kind of poetry we publish." I was a little offended but more challenged and formed even greater expectations of the Department when I was accepted as its student in 1970. I felt the nationalistic air and hostility to the Department, but the students carried on with great fortitude. LIDRA, the student journal of the department, started to publish, under Fernando's

encouragement and support, more local efforts. But what disturbed me was what he said to us students, after he attended the National Cultural Congress you mention. He said he accepted the Congress’ view of literature in Malaysia: national literature was only literature in Malay, while writings in English, Mandarin and Tamil were sectional literatures. I thought this was a skewed way of looking at literature and was disappointed that Fernando endorsed it. Languages, I further thought, were like musical instruments that together played a themed score in an orchestra, which was how I saw the Malaysian context, as accepting and nurturing literatures in whatever language not so much as national but as literatures that flourished in a particular soil and climate. The imposition of ethnically-biased conditions goes against the nature of any literature, the goal of which is to destroy boundaries and known views or concepts of life. A ridiculous debate raged in the *New Straits Times* in the early 1980s when a well-known writer went so far as to say that Malaysian writers must think, feel, make love and even shit in Malay! I was myself subjected to this kind of unnatural prejudice when the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) published my translation of my play *The Cord* in its Malay-language magazine, *Dewan Sastera*. Some DBP staff commented that I’d Tamilised the Malay language. That was ironic because no one had complained that I’d Tamilised English when the play was performed in the KL Townhall and in Singapore. Nor had any reader said of my story “Ratnamuni” that I’d done such a thing to English. This national and sectional literature prejudice even went so far as to let a student of the National University (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), when my lecturer-friend recommended that he read *In a Far Country*, for that student to say, “Why should I read a *kaafir* (infidel)’s work?”

The 1970s, and the decade that followed, ironically in a way, given the antagonistic sentiment that was in the air, marked a notable phase in the development of Malaysian literature in English. Lloyd Fernando, who was Professor and Head of English then, is credited with creating empowering opportunities for Malaysian English literature through his intellectual vision. Creative writing and Commonwealth Literature had been introduced into the curriculum; when I entered the department as an undergraduate in the 1980s, when you were already a lecturer and Fernando had retired, Commonwealth Literature, as a result of a conceptual shift, was offered as the New Literatures in English. What were the texts you encountered in the Commonwealth Literature course? What were the courses you taught after you were appointed a lecturer?

Most English-language writers were naturally defiant; they continued to write perhaps with the thought that no congress or court can legislate that only literature in Malay is the national literature. I guess they felt they could find a Malaysian voice even if they wrote in English. Writers like Lee Kok Liang and Ee Tiang Hong wrote with this kind of resistance to that definition; Lee’s “The

Mutes in the Sun” was written in an English he found Malaysians using and Ee warned that Malaysian writers should free themselves from “the mimicry of foreign birds” to be Malaysian. Local plays flourished. Lee Joo For was a sensation with his “The Barefoot Neighbour” and other plays, Patrick Yeoh quietly examined what it was to belong in his “The Need to Be,” Edward Dorall publicly questioned his faith in “The Hour of the Dog.” The Department theatre class produced “The Miracle Worker,” and there was a kind of festival of Brecht’s plays put on. All this made me review Fernando’s stand on national and sectional literatures. I realised he was merely mouthing a politicised insistence rather than really endorsing it. He had already brought out *Twenty-Two Malaysian Stories* (1968), an anthology of stories he had encouraged his students to write, his own novel, *Scorpion Orchid*, followed in 1976, and he then brought out *Malaysian Short Stories* (1981), which included four stories of mine. That was also why he had introduced a course on Commonwealth Literature, which later evolved, as you note, into the New Literatures in English. I read Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe as a student and other emerging writers when I joined the Department as a member of staff. Though we were required to teach the British canon and American and European literature, I did put on Malaysian Literature in English and Play and Short-Story Writing.

Is it your view that English should now be regarded as a Malaysian language?

English has long ceased to be exclusively the language of the British. In the postcolonial era, it has taken on different nuances and tones, especially in the ex-colonial countries. If we take its usage in Malaysia as an example, we can say Malaysians use it in their own fashion. There’s a Malaysian idiom and tone to it, sometimes irritating, sometimes pleasant because of its flavour. Though there is no insistence that we use a standard English, a globally evolved English is used in university dissertations, for instance, and in United Nations speeches, which doesn’t sound British at all. I don’t see why English shouldn’t be accepted as a Malaysian language since we speak it in our way, use it in the universities, business transactions and in international communications. English writers have more than fulfilled the poet Wong Phui Nam’s fervent dream articulated in the late 1960s that Malaysians make a language not their own, their own. Malaysian English writers have made significant impact here and overseas, earning megabuck advances and literary awards. So why shouldn’t English be regarded as a Malaysian language? I’ll go even further and say we should whenever possible learn each other’s languages, be it a Chinese dialect such as Hokkien or Cantonese, spoken Tamil, so that already being proficient in Malay, we can better understand what the Other thinks and feels, instead of allowing racial exclusiveness to take even deeper and disastrous root.

As a writer who works with so many forms, how did your academic work and your creative writing – novels, short stories, plays – influence each other and intersect? Now that you're no longer in academia, do you feel less pressured, "freed" in some way, as a writer?

The writers that I taught in the various Department courses hardly had any influence on my own works and development as a writer. However, by getting to know about their use of certain literary techniques, such as the imagistic or symbolic, for instance, I tried to fashion my own imagery or symbolism. I wasn't interested in "the isms" such as modernism, postmodernism, etc., which other writers adopted in their works, but once I discovered my own approach, a critic or two seemed to see in my work the magical realism of Garcia Marquez!

I didn't have to exert any kind of discipline to enter my work in progress. When I sat before the empty page, I wrote in exercise books those days, I was already into writing mode, completely cut off from everything else, and completely immersed in the experience I was bringing to the page. So, I didn't feel less pressured or freed from anything when I left academia, except that I didn't have to make time for my writing as I now had a sufficient call of it at my service.

What are your views on today's – what has been termed "transnational" or "global" – generation of Malaysian writers, those who live or are based abroad but write about Malaysia? Their works don't really take up diasporic issues, in the sense that they are settled abroad and writing about the struggles of belonging and identity faced by minority communities in their adoptive homelands. Rather, the charge, levelled mainly by postcolonial critics, is that these writers have made their reputations in the West by writing about their homelands in the East, often by pandering to a certain image that the metropolitan West harbours of the developing world. Indeed, marketing strategies often publicise these works as offering "insider" insights into the cultures and places of the "exotic East," with matching book jackets or covers to boot. Have you read any of these writers?

I must confess I haven't read any of these transnational or global Malaysian writers, only dipped into passages here and there but I've read some reviews of them. My impression is that these writers are responding to market influences and to the expectations of foreign readers. When they do write about the society back in their former country, they seem to play up to these expectations and produce what I call *exotica* or, in some cases, *erotica* because these sell.

I don't believe that the metropolitan West should directly or indirectly dictate what we should write. Nor should a writer fall into the desire to please. I've known critics who regard someone as a Malaysian poet simply because she enthused over the mangoes or the Penang Fried Koay Teow she missed! I don't think this kind of outdated romanticising should be used to sell the works of these transnational writers. I believe writers should work from their own creative sense

of self and focus on what their imagination or the intelligence I mentioned before prompts them to do in their work. I believe writers who hunger to be known globally consciously or unconsciously sacrifice this most valuable genius in them.

What do you make of the tendency of these authors to privilege historical fiction? Although your works also prompt a return to key historical moments such as the Japanese Occupation and World War II, your writings are grounded, at a very visceral level, on the “here and now,” on the daily lives led by Malaysians. Would you say that these writers are writing about a historical Malaysia, a Malaysia of the past, because, having left Malaysia, they are no longer embedded in its present? That they are disconnected from the intimate grind of the Malaysian everyday in the way that you and other writers who live in Malaysia are not?

They will certainly lose touch with the events of the day, the ambience of the country, or the feelings that influence the behaviour of its multicultural population. Unless they exert their imagination or that creative intelligence they won't go beyond the media-portrayed views of the country or of their past-frozen, memory-stored Malaysia. So, it is in a sense safer to use historical material, which they can interpret as they wish and which their imagination can feed upon unrestrained. Some may deliberately privilege historical fiction because they can exoticise it even more for the sensation hungry foreign readership, and so secure an even larger market.

I heard a foreign-based writer even accuse local Malaysian writers of being meek because they didn't use certain swear or four-letter words or be fully critical of the government and Malaysian society. I suppose this writer has gone so deep into disconnect, she has forgotten that different societies allow different and reduced freedoms, that local writers may use more challenging literary resources to voice their criticism or to present an alternative Malaysia.

I've only relied on historical events, as you mentioned, to dramatise contemporary or current desires, needs and yearnings. In other words, I try to make the past the present in terms of consciousness while focusing on the nitty-gritties of our present-day existence.

You were in the news last year when the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DPB), the government body that publishes and promotes as national literature only writings in the Malay language, in the April 2017 issue of its monthly magazine, accused you of migrating to the US to seek international acceptance and recognition. When a reader e-mailed the magazine editor to inform him that the article was erroneous as you were very much in Malaysia, instead of seeing it only fit to issue an apology or to ask the author of the article to rectify the information, the editor resorted to hurling racist invectives at the reader, an ethnic Indian who writes fiction in Malay. Even though your immediate response, when you were asked to comment on the misreporting, was to describe it as “fake news” that was best ignored, it is clear that this incident is reflective of the continuing arrogance and high-handedness of certain mindsets in our society. At points

like this, one realises that the transformation in thinking that is needed to bring about a "new" postracial Malaysia has yet to happen. Now that you've had time to reflect, would you like to comment further on this incident?

I'm not surprised by this very unprofessional behaviour. In the 1980s when Usman Awang formed the Committee for the Literatures of the Various Races, so as to promote the literatures in Mandarin, Tamil and English through bilingual publications, I was given the task of selecting, compiling and overseeing the translation of the works of English-language poets. The DBP didn't do its work as a publisher and get permission from the writers I had selected. When *An Anthology of Malaysian Poetry* came out, a lawyer-poet objected, quite rightly, to its distribution and sales. What did DBP do? They simply made the whole title disappear, I don't know where. There was no attempt to pacify the objecting poet, or apologise to the rest and me for doing so!

I don't think postracial Malaysia will ever happen. Hurling invectives instead of apologising or confirming my so-called migration to the US with me, the author in question, is not only typical DBP racist behaviour but also indicative of such racism down the line. I've worked closely with Malay writers and except for Usman Awang, a humble, deeply concerned and open-hearted man, the others seem to have developed or inherited an embedded sense of superiority. I was often condescendingly treated when I translated my poems and read them before the Sultan of Kedah – to laughter among the predominantly Malay university-student audience and sniggers in a similar audience in the Changkat Stadium where I'd read another poem I'd translated into Malay. This supremacist mindset began to show itself even in the early sixties when a Malay writer told me not to write in English if I wanted a literary future! Fast forward and I found the same superior attitude when I participated in public readings or literary meetings. If writers, who're supposed to be really sensitive to the core of their beings, can behave in this racist manner what do you expect of their common fellow beings?

The incident above is also very troubling because it has led to the creation of conditions and forms of thinking in our country in which a writer like you, a pioneer in so many ways and whose works are deemed credible enough to be included in the national school curriculum, is relegated to peripheral writer status in the echelons of national literature. This wilful isolation of your writings from narratives of the "national" by institutions of the state and the withholding of other forms of official recognition, the dwindling financial support from the private sector, the incremental narrowing of publication outlets with the closing down of the Heinemann Writers in Asia Series and then Skoob Books of London, among others, constitute some of the abysmal conditions of production for Malaysian English literature. You've outlined the predicament very well yourself in your aptly-titled 2006 essay "The Life of Writers in Malaysia." One of the things I admire and find worthy of respect is your resilience, that you have found a way to work with and through such an utterly discomfiting situation. Though I am aware that your continuing

to create is a powerful form of resistance, I am still interested to know – how has this situation affected your writing and your own critical evaluation of your work? How do you think your work has challenged this whole notion of the national canon?

I've never believed in or respected this consciously created notion of a national canon. Nationalism can be an oppressive tool in the wrong political hands, an imprisoning of the genuine creative minds within ethno-centred requisites and supremacist ideology. Instead of viewing literature as national or as non-national, why not think of it as literature produced by writers committed to the development, direction and well-being of the country? If I may go back to my earlier musical analogy, language is like a musical instrument. It can be the Indian sitar, the Chinese bamboo flute, the Malay serunai, all playing a common score, a composition filled with conflict, contrasts, counter-feelings and, finally, harmony – all stirred by the act of living in this country, Malaysia.

Though I've delivered a conference paper titled, "Writing from the Fringe of a Multicultural Society," I've never felt, personally, that I was at any kind of fringe. When you're deep into writing, which I'm tempted to call a *sadhana*, that is, a spiritual process, not a religious one, mind you, you don't feel you're at the periphery or centre or anywhere else except in an all-absorbing creative consciousness.

This is what keeps me writing. When viewed from a social or political context, it may be seen as resistance and resilience, but I see it as that life-affirming force that gives the writer a sense of worth, gives him a boundless curiosity and wonder to know what is this thing called life?

The lack of state or private sector support and dwindling publishing outlets only worry me minimally, for the total absorption and unexpected discoveries in the writing itself is a life not available to the materialistic crowd. As long as I continue to be spiritualised by these, I don't have to worry about critical evaluation from any quarters. Nor do I have to wonder how my work has challenged the national canon or even worry about my place in it. As long as I'm faithful to this spirit of writing, I don't have to bother with these other aspects. It is for others, like the reading public or academics and national institutions, to place or not place me wherever they want.

Although it is clear that from your second novel In a Far Country onwards, you're ranging more widely in terms of ethnicities and perspectives, a criticism that has been levelled at you, by your detractors and admirers alike, is that your works, at variance with the multiethnic precedent set by Fernando in Scorpion Orchid, tend to be insular, that they don't look beyond the goings-on within the ethnic Indian community. How would you respond to such a criticism?

Each writer has his way of presenting his perception of a multiethnic society within a nationalistic context. Putting in characters from the various communities

doesn't make a novel outward looking or "Malaysian" for that matter. Perception can come from an imaginatively lived experience or an intellectually explored and shaped vision. In other words, a writer can portray a desired multiethnic society or present it as an experience from which the reader himself imaginatively builds such a society.

As I said earlier, I've followed my inner promptings rather than follow the lead set by other writers, national and other canons, literary trends and developments. A work need not be viewed as insular if one sees its inner, deeper concerns. If you examine Rajan's experience on the afternoon he is sent to buy provisions for the family – he notices the laterite road transform itself into another-worldly something, from which he hastily flees and he later takes up money-making real estate business. Or if one analyses Sivasurian, a synthesis of Shiva and Surian, or the cosmic dancer and the sun, darkness and light, and this character's miraculous shift from a cowherd to a worker in an eating shop, then a wanderer all over the country, helping to dislodge one's self-centred engagement with the material world, you will see there is a form of cosmic consciousness at work here. How that makes a work insular, I don't know! I think those who think my works are insular are imposing their ideas of what a Malaysian novel should be. I can't say I've been indifferent to such criticism, but following my inner promptings I went on to write *Between Lives*, which very obviously shows characters from the various communities allying themselves in sharing and ultimately working for the concept of a multicultural Malaysia. When one treats a writer's work in isolation instead of viewing it as a connected set of works, in my case, *The Return*, *In a Far Country* and *Between Lives* as a trilogy, there can be misinterpretations and a circumscribed view of the writer's vision. These works have had an international reach not because I wanted such a reputation. My friends, including a Swiss teacher, saw in *The Return*, for example, not insularity but universality. She sent me copies of her students' responses to the novel, which she'd put on her English course, and none of them indicated an inaccessible insularity.

I am aware that writers don't feel representative in their writing of any kind of label. In interviews you've given before, you talked about how you are more than a "political writer", that politics is only one of the forces that shapes your characters' lives, that it doesn't dictate your stories. Could you clarify this please? Isn't writing a deeply political act?

I think a lot of readers and the literary community tend to view a writer's works from some social, ethnic and political standpoint. There are obvious political writers who take politics as a dominating force that makes or breaks a community's or individual's life. I treat, as you've said, politics as only one of the forces. The other forces involve the psychologies that societies and individuals create for themselves. In Malaysia, for instance, the dominant community seems

to still think of the immigrant-descended community pejoratively as aliens or “pendatang” (newly-arrived), asking them to go back to their countries when they’ve no country to go back to except Malaysia! These racist assumptions may acquire the power of a shaping force on both the Malay and non-Malay characters in a novel, but there is a more fundamental and deeper force, which I’ve come to recognise as the life force. This is an inborn complex consciousness which strives to manifest and be itself in spite of an overwhelming materialism, social conformity and artificially developed psychologies. So, for me, writing isn’t only a deeply political act, but also an attempt to grasp the ever-elusive nature of this consciousness. I’ll quote the experience Rajan of *In a Far Country* undergoes to give a glimpse into this consciousness, an experience from which he flees. “There was no time; there was no place. There came a muffled booming sound from beneath my feet. Startled, I let the paper bag fall. But it would not fall with the speed with which gravity pulled down objects. The paper bag sailed down the breezeless air. The barks of the trees rustled like silk, the dusky, speckled layers sliding over each other. They flaked and then floated to the ground, parchments inscribed with an indecipherable code.”

You’ve written essays that have been very well received, serving as an important resource especially for scholars of Malaysian literature. I am thinking in particular of “The New Diaspora,” in which you speak at length about the role that can be played by literature in English in a multicultural and multiethnic nation such as Malaysia that is also rapidly globalising. Do the concerns you express in this 1996 essay about the ghettoising of “community” or “sectional” literatures (such as writings in Chinese and Tamil) and that of Malay literature, which even though it is attributed “national” status is not imbued with the “boundary-breaking” impetus that is needed to represent the “multiplicity” of Malaysian culture, continue to hold today? In what way does Malaysian English literature exemplify for you the chameleon’s ability to make that imaginative leap across boundaries? Has Malaysian literature in English, as produced by the nation’s “stay-at-home” writers, found an international audience as you had hoped?

The ghettoised literatures of the communities and the national literature, with some Chinese and Indians contributing to it, I think, still haven’t brought down the walls of suspicion, hostility, envy, fear of the so-called sons-of-the-soil toward the so-called immigrant citizens. Of course politics, which relies on the race and religion cards to win electoral votes, has a great deal to do with it, but the various literatures, which could have been boundary-breaking, have remained at the communal navel-gazing or insular level, the very thing my works are sometimes accused of. Or they have become mere entertainment or exoticised, export literature. Malaysian English writers have, to some extent, made bolder forays into their imagination perhaps influenced by the world literatures they have been exposed to or, perhaps, in some cases to market their works, they have

consciously created a Malaysian novel. While doing so they have also, minimally or unintentionally, broken down some of these communal walls.

Although the nation's "stay-at-home" writers haven't found a huge, fan-breeding, international following or audience, they've been taken seriously by readers, critics and scholars in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Canada and perhaps the US. Going by my own experience, I can with some assurance say, since I've been invited to these countries for conferences and readings, that my works have made some impact, even if selectively, on the readers in these countries. And, of course, dissertations have been written on Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando, myself but my works are also discussed more generally in the context of Malaysian English literature by postgraduate and PhD students and researching academics. I've had on occasion a couple of students come to visit me, one from Australia, for instance, to see the man who made it possible for her to write a PhD titled "Violence in the Fiction of K.S. Maniam." I was interviewed in Australia by another student who ended up working on her PhD dissertation, "K.S. Maniam: Seeking the Universe in Man." Like other Malaysian English writers, I've been immediately recognised and welcomed by appreciators of our works at international conferences. A modest, but slowly growing and, I hope, a lasting international attention!

Do you think Malaysian literature in English will be able to hold its own given the current explosion of popular fiction and the various kinds of support – publishing avenues, monetary awards, audience's taste – that are readily available for this genre of writing? In spite of Malaysia's expanding middle class, which is the traditional market base for literary fiction, a look at our current bestseller lists suggests that the market favours "less demanding" – fantasy, horror, science fiction, romance, detective – prose fiction. The novel of course cannot lend itself to trends or sound bites, it has to explore and somehow express all of those complicated parts of ourselves, often having to move out of linear time and realism itself in order to be able to depict those ruptures in our histories and identities, as you do so well especially in your second novel, In a Far Country. Will the novel form survive, you think?

Not only Malaysian literature in English but also literatures elsewhere are confronted by this situation. Literary fiction doesn't sell, is the most repeated publishers' mantra. I think this allows publishers to pander to readers' tastes and popular trends, and rake in megabucks. Readers too want what is light and fast. This isn't just due to distractions of the cell phone or internet, but a pervasive unwillingness on the part of readers to grapple with a deeper understanding of life, or with the inner complexities that make us human. What was once the Book of Life, the novel, has been thrown away without any consideration or even distaste. I get the impression that rather than nurture an inquisitive and explorative attitude, societies and individuals are getting deeper and deeper into an escapist frame of mind. Entertainment is what they want, not enlightenment

or delving deep into the nature of their personalities and life itself. They want a linear mass-treaded road rather than the vertical or multi-layered spirals of literary fiction.

“The novel is dead or in its last throes!” has been the repeated cry over the last few decades. Literary fiction the world over, including works from truly devoted Malaysian writers, will survive because writers who seriously engage with the form are willing to keep the original importance of the creative intelligence or imagination. This isn’t merely to hold the mirror up to individual or social developments, but to dig deep into and unearth the boundless nature of being alive. These writers are willing to hold conventional jobs to pay their bills, but work at night or during weekends and long holidays to explore the many paths the novel can take into unravelling the complexities of our lives, histories and of civilisation itself. Freed from survival needs, they can boldly and passionately experiment with the form and unearth the versatilities of the imagination and, once again, be the guardian of that human talent, creativity.

It seems to me that if one pursues the time span that courses through your body of work, from the earliest story, “The Eagles” (1976), to your most recent collection, A Stranger to Love (2018), one is able to chart the evolutionary trajectory of the ethnic Indian community of Malaysia. Your focus has now shifted from the politics of identity and belonging to struggles of a different kind – the malaise lying at the heart of the professional or middle classes, those who on the surface look like they have made it but are unravelling within. In compelling us to consider the pressures of present-day urban life in Malaysia, as opposed to the hardships of life in the estates, you suggest that despite achieving material success and economic plenitude, your characters are still untethered and adrift, troubled by betrayals, beset by rage and haunted by emptiness. What were your immediate motives for writing this collection of stories?

I didn’t have any conscious motives except to explore what the creative intelligence, always active, nudges me into. This intelligence, as I mentioned before, keeps expanding but also identifying newer complexities and conflicts that take hold of mankind. The struggle to survive, satisfy physical and psychological needs, identify with the land, nation, have been replaced by other needs or have transmuted into different senses of the self. Besides wanting to move away from my earlier cast of characters, community and concerns, I wanted to see why, as you say, individuals and societies were still very much adrift, or directionless. Families are breaking down, people seem to think happiness and fulfilment come from the outside, yet feel something is missing in spite of their material achievements. Their success makes them vulnerable to exploitation, commercial and political conditioning and, because they have had a hand in the construction of roads, buildings and ultimately of cities, they also feel they can construct their own happiness and not have to depend on natural human instincts that have evolved through the centuries. The deep yearning for a more lasting

sense of life and being is perhaps best expressed in "A Puzzling Sorrow." The boy narrator, disturbed by the brutalities he has witnessed and been subjected to by his mother and her women friends who seem to have departed from their feminine selves, at the end, lives in his inner space to "wait for I don't know what." In a way, the inner space or life he mentions seems to be the missing element in the lives of urbanised individuals. This is evident even in the life of the main character of the titular story, "A Stranger to Love." While she seems to be a dutiful and kind daughter-in-law and a faithful wife, some kind of emptiness seems to draw her into the duplicity of a double life. This double life is also present in most of the stories, sometimes lived unconsciously, sometimes consciously constructed by the characters. The stories, I hope, point to an awareness of a more natural and authentic form of life with which modern societies must engage if human beings are not to become an endangered species!

The first-person, male, confessional mode in all of the nine stories of the collection, but most palpably in "Guardian Knot," kept taking me back to Ravi of your debut novel, The Return. However, instead of cohering towards the end, as we were left hoping at the conclusion of your first novel, Ravi's trajectory of longing and belonging, through his various alter egos in your latest collection, has come undone, frayed, fallen apart. Desire and attachment have resulted in disillusionment and disenchantment. Would you agree that you're now more concerned with exposing a community that has lost its vitality?

The community in this collection, as you'll have noticed, isn't a mono-ethnic one. In a way, I'm viewing society in my current fiction not as something defined by its ethnic origins, but rather by what has given it a common image once dislocated from its traditional cultural attachments. I'm now focusing on a wider set of people adrift on an anchorless sea of modern desires and hopes. This emerging society, basically urban, find themselves lost in the sense that they're beset by problems, personal and social, without any reassuring lens to lead them to some kind of stability. So, they tend to fall prey to shallow or narcissistic appetites or perverted personal ambitions, and to individual means to give their lives some sort of a significance or coherence in the face of approaching self-dissolution. One of them concocts a story of victimhood to ward off this sense of emptiness, indirectly advising his listener not to place trust in his family. Another, using technology, loots the banks which he feels has robbed him and his family of a decent life. The boy-narrator, I mentioned earlier, waits for a reinvigorating order of life, the "big picture," so that he can find some sort of a direction of his own. I think I was subconsciously concerned not so much with a loss of vitality but with a distraction from life for want of a more significant or value-guided perception of self, family, society and even country.

What would you wish your children and grandchildren to make of their heritage, of those struggles of your generation and the generation back? I am aware that the layers of complexity and “becoming” that accrue to cultural and national identity arise in part from the Sellama-Sumitra double helix of remembering and forgetting that you capture so beautifully in your third novel, Between Lives. I am still interested in knowing what you wish made of this outside of your fiction.

I think in a country, or for that matter, in a world where there isn't the be and let be, believe and let believe of a liberal society, the present and future generations have to discover different ways of being. I use the word “being” that comes of course from the other double helix of human and being to suggest not a becoming or acquiring of an identity, national or otherwise, but to understand or better still, perceive, what your original nature is and enter it to live more deeply and completely. There are too many intrusions into your being human – global, national, ideological, political, social, religious and, very importantly, technological – that one forgets what it is to be human. A human being, from my perception of him/her, isn't just an existential entity to be shaped by the various influences I mentioned, but also an awareness, uniquely individual, which I'd like to call spiritual. I think, to be fully human, one has to be keenly aware of this non-physical dimension. It is, in a sense, that inclusive intelligence I mentioned earlier, which, to put it in another way, is a limitless awareness or perception. This allows one to rise above the various man-made ideologies, social, political and other structures that reduce one to a mere meme of these structures, that is, a bundle of reflex actions, emotions and thoughts, instead of an organic bundle of limitless possibilities, of life itself. Nationalism, globalism, culturalism will all seem restrictive and trivial pursuits in the face of these unlimited possibilities. That will form the struggle and the becoming of everything that has an eternal value. This perception of life is a mutation of what the previous generations, even if unjustly labelled immigrant, went through. This is the spirit, even if unconsciously or subconsciously inherited from the civilisation they originally came from, which if the children and grandchildren not only adopt but take even further, will allow them to rise above the unnatural and prejudiced forces that might try to dominate and make their lives merely existential. This evolving spirit will allow their glorious being to *be*.

I've heard it said that writing is an act of courage for it forces the writer to confront his or her vulnerabilities. Would you say that over the course of your forty-year career that the struggle has diminished a little, that it doesn't require as much courage to write?

Writing is always a kind of courageous confrontation with what lies deep within a writer, his or her willingness to draw them out and take the risk of being assaulted critically or institutionally for treading on sensitive cultural, racial and

even personal areas. I was somewhat scared when I wrote my first six stories over some months in 1975, stories which made me delve into the sometimes vile and vulgar practices within the Indian community, but also expose their most desperate and tender dreams. *The Return*, I felt, would be taken as being too autobiographical and expose me nakedly to those who were class-conscious and cross-cultural conscious, which did happen with the novel being criticised as being too insular. But this gave me added courage because the Malaysia narrative, my budding preoccupation, was coming into my fiction, but the nationalistically expectant, perhaps even, careless reader was myopically prevented from seeing the novel as Malaysian: Ravi’s father, Naina, fashioning local gods from the river clay of the land was indeed expressing his desperate need to belong to the country. The struggle to develop the Malaysia narrative took on a more inclusive spirit *In a Far Country* and *Between Lives*. The other works such as the short stories “Arriving” and “Terminal,” just to name a couple, were propped up even more courageously by this spirit, but also by the creative intelligence that I’ve referred to several times here; this inclusive awareness has relentlessly seen to it that I be unflinchingly honest in bringing to the reader’s notice the deepest and most humane truths we Malaysians need to realise. I don’t know if that requires less courage even with my more than forty years of writing.

Finally, can you tell us anything about what you are working on or are occupied with at the moment?

I hope to reissue *The Return*, and the story collection, *Haunting the Tiger*. I also hope to bring out my new novel, *Light at the Window*. I usually don’t talk about any work in progress, but as this is already completed, I’ll let you have a peek. The novel continues the Malaysia narrative, but without emphasising it too obviously. It presents Malaysians of various ethnicities, who’ve freed or are distancing themselves from their traditional cultures and trying to keep up with trends elsewhere in the world, or with some new inner promptings. They try to cope with newer social and psychological mindsets and influences. The main male character, who goes to do his PhD in the UK, is seduced by a young British woman, who makes up and sells an incestuous rape story – itself a comment on how far the former colonising society has fallen. Back in Malaysia, he marries a woman who yearns for a second chance in life. They make a creative pair but when they move into an affluent housing estate, she falls in with her rich women neighbours and together they explore their own brand of feminism, asserting themselves to the point of breaking up the family. The tools of technology such as the cell phone and internet are used to deceive or create new images of themselves and deconstruct lingering traditional practices and views of life. The novel’s layered or non-linear approach to social change and development will

hopefully take the reader into an understanding of the further evolution of human nature.

I'm now also into poetry. I started with it in my teens and continued with it up to somewhere in middle age, when it trickled to a stop. Other forms, the short story, novel and play took over, but as some critics have observed, and I myself recognise, it has often exerted its presence as poetic prose in some of these works. I also told myself when I was distracted from poetry by these other forms, that I'd return to it when I was much older, when my perceptions of the world and human experience were deeper and more distilled, that I'd meet up with it again as my creative but challenging companion so that if I'd once lived to write, I must now write to live.

Mr Maniam, thank you.

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