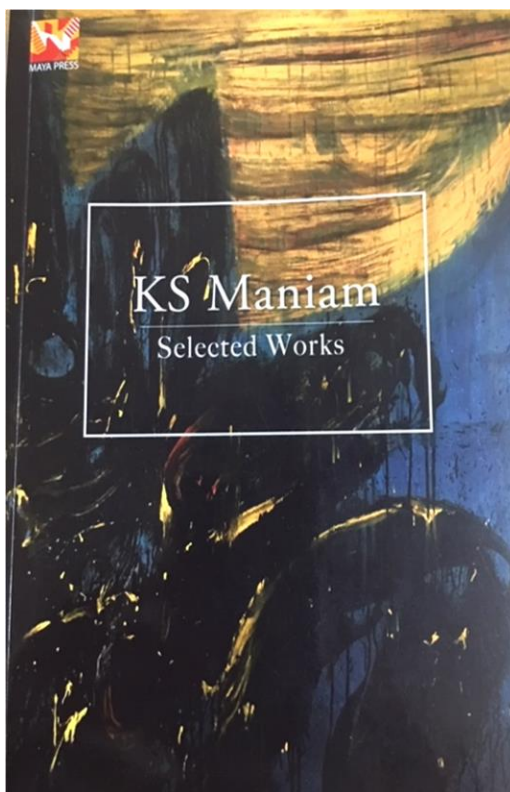


Maniam, K.S. *KS Maniam: Selected Works*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2019. 297 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-58-2.



On 9 March 2019, literary figures, academics, friends and admirers of Malaysian author K.S. Maniam gathered to pay tribute to him in an event organised by the University of Nottingham, Kuala Lumpur. Entitled “K.S. Maniam’s Writing: A Celebration,” this event also saw the launching of the author’s latest book, *KS Maniam: Selected Works*. Extracts from the book were read by a select group of people. The readings showcased the far-ranging themes Maniam engages with in his writings: marriage, man-woman relationships, politics, multiculturalism, youth, death, the cycle of life, race identity, etc. He explores a whole gamut of emotions too, from sadness and despair, to yearning, desire, fear and joy. However, one subject that Maniam writes about with particular passion and astuteness is the issues and challenges facing the Indian diasporic community living in Malaysia and this is, perhaps, his most celebrated contribution to Malaysian Literature in English.

KS Maniam: Selected Works serves as an excellent introduction to readers unaccustomed to Maniam's writings as it contains extracts from his well-known works. The compilation also serves as a tasting board of Maniam's writing style, demonstrating his dexterity in tackling different genres of literature: novels, short stories, plays and poetry. Indeed, though Maniam is a prolific writer, the selection of works in this compilation contains, what I believe, are his most significant writings. The book begins with an extract from Maniam's *The Return*, arguably his most famous work and also, his first novel. The opening paragraph of *The Return* gives the description of Periathai, the grandmother of Ravi, the narrator in the novel. Scholars have found this an emotive depiction which captures the burdensome uncertainty, dogged determination and courage of the first generation of Indian migrants arriving in Malaysia. Over the years, Periathai has become the most identifiable Indian grandmother in Malaysian Literature in English. While *The Return* focuses on the Indians living in the estates, the other novel included in the selection, *Between Lives*, showcases a wider context of the Indian community in Malaysia. This story, however, also carries the same theme found in the earlier novel, i.e., the need for the diasporic person to stake a claim on the land they now occupy. The old woman in the novel, Sellamma, lives in the country and the younger woman, Sumitra who is trying to evict her from her home, is a busy cosmopolitan woman who is unimpressed by the struggles of the Indians who first came to Malaysia. In the tussle both women have over the precious piece of land, what comes through is the importance of belonging to a place and the powerful nexus of place and identity. Maniam does a good job of portraying Sumitra's growing confusion about herself and her life when she faces Sellamma and is exposed to other values and realities represented by the older lady. Similar uncertainties and turbulent emotions are depicted in the extract from the novel *In A Far Country* in which the male narrator comes to question his carefully structured life when he interacts with people from different ethnicities and friends from his past.

The themes and ideas expressed in the novels, seep into the other genres in this compilation. The "Short Stories" section in the book contains five stories from various collections. Though all the stories are interesting, the two which I liked most was "Ratnamuni" and "The Loved Flaw". The former is a monologue by an Indian migrant, new to the country and desperately poor. In simple English infused with inflections from the Tamil language, the unnamed speaker talks about the severe hardships he has had to face ever since his arrival in Malaysia. His is a tragic tale ending with a murder. The man's speech, fraught with sadness and bewilderment, underlines yet again the trauma of being unaccommodated, of not belonging. "The Loved Flaw" has two narrators expounding on their adulterous affair. Their separate, alternating narratives capture the complexities in a man-woman relationship and the prominent role religion, family and customs play in the Indian community. Indeed Maniam is impressive when he enters the

minds of his characters and this is eminently displayed in the extracts from his plays, *The Cord* and *The Sandpit:Womensis*. For me, the latter was compelling in the way it uses the voices of two women, Santha and Sumathi, both wives of an absent Mr Dass, to reflect the myriad problems faced by women in a patriarchal community. The women, vastly different in their circumstances, do not like each other. Many parts of the dialogue in the play are touching as they capture the dreams and simple wishes of the women as they try to find meaning in their quietly unhappy lives: they both share the desperate desire to be loved.

Though not often acknowledged as a writer of poetry, Maniam has published some of his poems and the nine poems selected for this book range across a whole emotional human landscape which takes in loneliness, alienation, confusion, frustration, happiness and compassion. The poems are rich in symbolism and imagery and have an experimental quality about them. Poems like “Transience,” “The Truly Privileged” and “Colour Schemes” read like narratives. What comes through in these poems is the desire of the writer to explore different ways of perceiving, of feeling and of seeing. The poem “Loneliness” beautifully interprets the feeling of aloneness not as the sad emotion it is always made out to be, but as a friend who takes the poet into “the crevices of the heart;/...into the subtle/revelations of life” (271). “Behold My Perfection!” seeks to look at beauty beyond the superficial. The poem opens with a mother advising her daughters: “Beauty doesn’t lie in the eye of the beholder/my mother said long ago, but deep within/the eye of the beheld” (281). The poem goes on to show how the so-called requisites of beauty like a particular look, a style, fashion ultimately are empty signifiers, “a spent ash heap” (283). Instead beauty grows within the person, finding its way to the exterior: “our mother lives/out her body, lived out herself, outlived style” (281). “The Truly Privileged” attacks the so-called privileged groups, people in positions of authority or those who have the fortune of living in the country of their birth, who wrongly perceive diasporic communities, people who have moved from their ancestral home countries. Maniam questions how people already “indigenized” continue to be labelled as “migrants” and calls for the removal of limited ways of thinking, to accept that “this all-accommodating earth” is home to everyone (285).

It must have been a tough task for all those involved to select the writings for this compilation because Maniam has written so much and so well but *KS Maniam: Selected Works* succeeds in capturing the depth and diversity of the author’s literary talent. Without doubt, this book showcases the creativity and courage of the writer KS Maniam.

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